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The Kindness of Flowers

Kenneth Zahorski
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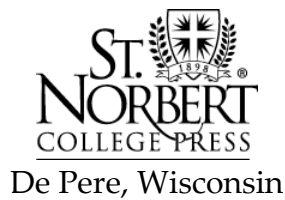
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The Kindness of Flowers

The Kindness of Flowers and Other Poems

Kenneth J. Zahorski



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From the Editor:

This book is dedicated to Ken Zahorski,
my beloved spouse and soul mate,
with gratitude and admiration;
to our two daughters,
Twila Michelle Zahorski Meo
and Alison Dawn Zahorski Heideman,
born out of love, respect, and holiness;
and to their daughters,
Amanda Mary Meo, Savanna Rose Meo,
and Isabella Jean Heideman, our future.

"I love you not only for what you are,
but for what I am with you. I love you
not only for what you have made of yourself,
but what you are making of me. I love you
for the part of me that you bring out."

— *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* —

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If it takes a village to raise a child, just as surely it takes a multitude of dedicated master gardeners to nurture and grow that lush springtime flourish we call a book. We take great pleasure here in thanking our many fine gardeners. To begin with, we are deeply grateful to our multi-talented, hardworking, and loving band of family members: Alison (text design), Pat (cover design), and Twila (proofreading). Further, we truly appreciate and admire St. Norbert College's superb publishing team: Susan Allen (Editor and Manager of Publications), Drew Van Fossen (Director of Communication and Design), and Anja Marshall (Publications Intern). In addition, we are indebted to Rodger Beyer (Worzalla Sales Representative), a cordial cicerone who helped us navigate the complex, sometimes confusing, print-ready labyrinth; Paul Mroczynski (Manager of Printing and Distribution) for leading us to Worzalla; Bishop Robert Morneau, esteemed fellow poet, for his wisdom, inspiration, and gentle nurturance; and Tom Kunkel, President of St. Norbert College, for his unflagging encouragement and support.

For all these good folks and for the many friends and colleagues who, over the years, have taken the time to both read closely and comment on the author's poems, we, like Shakespeare's Sebastian, "can no other answer make but thanks, and thanks, and ever thanks, and oft."

Preface

I received my first letter from Ken in 1958, shortly after we met. I now realize that subconsciously he was honing his poetic craft as he described in eloquent verse how I had been dressed the morning I left Wisconsin to return to Missouri. However, it would not be until 1984, twenty-two years after our marriage, that he would write his first titled poem, "Pre-Dawn Musings," a brief recounting of a memorable Door County thunderstorm. The poem was eventually published in *ALPS*, at that time the St. Norbert College literary journal.

His poem, "The Middle Years," describes in general what happened between this time and 2005 when, following his brief retirement, he began writing some prose vignettes aimed at sharing what it was like growing up on an eighty-acre hardscrabble dairy farm in northwestern Wisconsin. These intimate prose paintings became the basis for many of his first poems.

Between 2007 and 2013, he published four poetry chapbooks. In each he expressed appreciation to me for serving as his sounding board and candid critic. I decided from the very start to always be honest in my critiques. This I have done, but it has never been easy suggesting changes to writings on which someone has labored so diligently and for whom you have so much respect and love. However, it was precisely because of these deep feelings that I could do nothing else but be absolutely frank, for quite simply I wanted to help my husband become the very best poet possible. After following the growth of his craft over the past decade, I do believe that his record of accomplishment proves he has earned this status. He has had poems published in more than forty journals and magazines and has also garnered several awards for his work.

When I suggested to Ken that he put together a volume of his poetry rather than more chapbooks, he dismissed the idea, protesting that his poems weren't deserving of a more formal collection. But I persisted, even volunteering to help because I felt so strongly that his work had earned a wider audience and thus a more substantial form of publication. My resolve, reinforced by similar urgings from a number of friends and colleagues, finally wore down Ken's reluctance. Thus began a project that has truly been a labor of love with my husband of more than half a century.

The sheer magnitude of Ken's poetic output (more than 600 poems), has made it difficult to choose the works I feel must definitely be included in this collection. To do this I reread all of his poems several times. Although quite an endeavor, I am now content with those finally selected. It was also important to me that I clearly explain to him how and why I made my choices and I believe this has been done to his satisfaction.

Ken's goal as a poet has been to make his poems clear, accessible, and authentic. In addition, he has always wanted his readers to be able to identify emotionally with the subjects and characters he writes about. I hope you will feel as I do that he achieves this, and that there is a poem or two here for everyone. In the final stanza of "Mr. Muir Ponders a Poem," Ken has the famous naturalist state that when a poem of his is read he wants it to be a very personal journey that the reader and author take together, metaphorically walking hand in hand throughout the experience. Both Ken and I would like to feel your hands in ours as you make your way through the poems in *The Kindness of Flowers*. May our journey together be both pleasant and memorable.

Marijean Allen Zahorski, Editor

About the Author

Kenneth J. Zahorski, Professor Emeritus of English and Ombudsman at St. Norbert College, is the author or co-author of twelve books and four poetry chapbooks, *Leaves from the Family Tree* (2007), *More Leaves from the Family Tree* (2008), *Roots & Other Poems* (2011), and *Dancing at Dusk & Other Travel Poems* (2013). His award-winning poems have appeared in numerous literary magazines and journals throughout the United States, including *The Rockford Review*, *Pennsylvania English*, *Delta Epsilon Sigma Journal*, *English Journal*, *ByLine*, *Poem*, *The Aureorean*, *Yale Anglers' Journal*, and *Avocet*. A lifelong amateur naturalist, an avid reader and traveler, and a collector of seashells and memories, he holds membership in The Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets and The Rockford Writers' Guild. The father of Twila and Alison, and the grandfather of Amanda, Savanna, and Isabella, he lives in Green Bay, Wisconsin with his wife, Marijean, and their cat, Pesto.

Poet's Craft



“Write a little everyday,
without hope, without despair.”

— *Isak Dinesen* —

Invocation

Shadow Poet
dwelling
deep
within me,
sharpen
my senses

so that
like
a newborn
child
my
eyes
might see
everything
fresh
and true.

Poet's Plight

Back stooped into question mark,
neck taut and aiming forward

like a heron hunting minnows,
I silently hunch over

my legal pad, pencil-beak poised
to spear any promising metaphor

that shimmers by.
But today the waters hold

only my hungry shadow, and as darkness
descends I straighten and flex

my bowed body, moving into yet
another night with tablet empty,

holding hope the morning
will bring better fishing.

Afghans

My wife's knitting needles move
rhythmically as heartbeat,
the downy skein of yarn on her lap
unwinding slowly as a woodland path,
gently as a mother brushing baby's hair.
Like an orchid
the afghan grows out of air,
this time for a grandchild, but
only one of dozens over the decades,
all in pastels soft and delicate
as spring twilight. Emerging now
a fan-stitch knitted in broad panels
of lemon yellow, peach, and silver cream,
so gossamer it seems to float above her knees.

And I sit in the chair across from hers
gripping tight my leaden pencil,
tapping a scruffy legal pad
blank as unsold billboard,
struggling for words, for ideas,
for anything
that might transmute to poem,
but my needles remain still,
no stitches formed, no patterns
emerging, no colors to sugar the eye,
no softness, no beauty, no utility,
nothing to show for hours of effort:

my wife's world all April and rainbow,
mine all January and snowdrift.

Writer's Block

A poem a day!

I used to say

Until the field

Held back its yield

Until the well

Went dry as Hell

Until the mind

No words could find

Until the verse

Turned bad then worse

Until the block

Would not unlock

Until my Muse

Said, *I refuse!*

A poem a day!

I used to say

Patience

Pursuing the elusive
poet's craft, I pushed
hard into the undergrowth,
nose snuffling the ground
like a baying hound
hot on the trail
of some crafty old raccoon,
wanting my prize
treed and captive,

but, instead,
the faster I pursued,
the fainter the scent,
the more distant
my quarry.

Slow down,
 slow down,
 slow down,
I finally told myself,
and take your rest
in the dappled shade
of some venerable oak
and there
wait . . . wait
in the leafy coolness
until your poem sidles up
and sits beside you
where, in nurturing silence,
two become one.

Recipe for Poetry

“Cooking up a poem,
now that takes some doing,”
mused the chef,
his forehead furrowed deep
as boiled calf’s tongue.

“But, really, it’s a matter of patience
more than anything else.
First, you take a big pot
and fill it with raw experience,
then cover with water and boil
until everything gets broken
down into a nice broth,
then blend with some thoughts
—that’s your brown sauce—
simmer some more,
and even some more, always
skimming the fat that rises.

Now, after you’ve reduced
it by half (at least),
you strain what’s left,
add a splash of Madeira,
and —*voila!*— you have
the *demi-glace* called poetry.”

Plastic Surgery

I performed plastic surgery on a poem
today, nipping and tucking, tightening

a few sagging lines, removing some wrinkles,
thinning here, plumping there, transplanting

ideas, liposuctioning the fat, grafting
some new bone into a drooping stanza.

Oh, this wasn't a mere nose job or tummy
tuck, or the simple lacing up of a turkey neck,

but rather major reconstruction, an altering
of the poem's very being, now smooth and taut

and perfectly contoured, not a blemish, not
a syllable out of place, even the enjambments

cut and sutured. Sleek and handsome it was,
and slick, and of no real interest whatsoever.

Classroom Poets

My instructors were poets, really,
their teaching different as English bard

from haiku master, but each a poet
at heart. Some were sonneteers, systematic

and precise, moving from problem
toward resolution neat as rhymed couplet.

Some were lyricists, shunning constrictive
structures, capering through class periods

like Elizabethan revelers nimbly stepping
to a spirited galliard. Others were balladeers,

enlisting story and sketch to bring home
their lessons, using incremental repetition

to help us remember facts, no matter how
dry the topic. Despite the occasional doggerel,

purple passages, sentimental odes, and villanelles
that sometimes paralyzed with abstruse complexity,

my classroom poets practiced their craft well,
helping determine the form and meter of my life.

Powers of Observation

"It is not difficult to understand
Shakespeare's genius,"
the teacher explained.

"Just imagine walking
from your car to the front door.

You see a lawn, perhaps one
that needs mowing, but Shakespeare
observes a tiny dandelion,
its dainty crown catching
the dusty gold of the setting sun.

You see a sidewalk,
but he observes an expansive list
where two ants
armored like medieval knights
prepare for a tourney.

You see a tree, but Shakespeare
observes a swarthy, rough-skinned giant
clothed in forest green,
his long, gnarly arms
reaching out for passersby.

You walk briskly into the house,
but the Bard pauses
on the doorstep, lingering
until the cardinal's plaintive song
reaches its ardent conclusion."

Ms. O'Keeffe Paints a Poem

My words,
like blood-red poppies
and ivory-skinned calla lilies,
must bud and blossom
upon the page,
their rapture and ache,
their light and shadow
all sensory ripe,
all meaning magnified,
feelings laid bare
as sun-bleached skull.

My words
must glow the hue of burnt gold,
of sturdy sun-baked adobe,
of ancient sandstone cliffs,
of honeyed amber.

My words
must hold the reader
in a lover's embrace
fervent and abiding,
as ardent as the luxurious light
of a torrid desert sunset.

Mr. Poe Invokes a Poem

Black shall be the cloak
shrouding the shoulders
of my skulking stanzas,

pendulum-like my lines
as they swing, swing, swing,
smooth but menacing,

my end rhymes as tight
and sure
as hangman's noose,

my tone and meaning
sharp
as guillotine's blade,

refrains and alliterations
tintinabulating
like funeral bells,

my closing couplet
as conclusive as raven
croaking *nevermore*.

Poetry

shouts

Danger!

Enter at your own risk!

In
this
zone
you
become
a mind
and soul
spelunker,
exploring
psychic caves
deep
 and winding
 and mysterious,
illuminated
solely
by the halogen glow
of word-lamps.

Family



“I sustain myself with the
love of family.”

— *Maya Angelou* —

Roots

Someday, I, too, will dig deep into ancestral soil,
tracing my lineage like a miner following

glittering veins of buried ore; someday, I, too,
will burrow like curious mole, tunneling through

ragged root line, seeking the nurturing cusp
where tiny hairs absorb the water and salts

that feed a spreading tree; but, first, I must dig
closer to home, explore my own inner earth,

fathom the parentage of my thoughts and beliefs,
sift through shifting sands in search of artifacts

that might help explain it all, and, then, before
delving into lives and times preceding mine,

splice together a rope of wisdom stout enough
to bind present with past, past with present.

Stowaway

Rats his only company
for nine long days
my mustachioed little grandfather,
poor as a Polish field mouse,
shivered his way
to the *land of milk and honey*
in a half-empty shipping crate
standing in a dark corner
of an Atlantic freighter's hold,
then, in the dead of night,
famished and frightened,
legs wobbly and weak,
he scuttled down a rain-slick gangplank
to a foggy Lake Erie pier,
bewildered and alone.

A few months later,
on the wild edge
of northwestern Wisconsin's Barron Hills,
he began clearing
a few hardscrabble acres
in the *promised land*,
running to hide himself
whenever a stranger appeared,
the fear of deportation
etched deep
on his work-worn face,
the dank, earth-walled basement
in which he crouched
his new shipping crate.

Irony

A fiery little man,
my grandfather could never
get enough of TV wrestling.
Perched precariously
on chair's edge,
fists clenched,
crisp white mustache twitching,
body tense as a praying mantis,
he lived the action, delivering
the vicious body slams of Killer Kowalski
and growling
with solid satisfaction when
Whipper Boy Watson applied
his patented *sleeper* hold.
But with my grandmother
things were not so good.
Oh, she loved Liberace's charm
and Arthur Godfrey's placid patter
pleased her to no end,
but wrestling, crime shows, and westerns
drove her to distraction,
sometimes even tears.
Knitting her hands and uttering
Polish invocations to a vast repertoire
of favorite saints, she could not
be persuaded that the images
of violence and death were not real.
And, Grandpa, who never tired
of openly scoffing at his wife's naiveté,
faithfully watched his wrestling shows,
where he knew reality ruled.

Safe Harbor

Broad as a galleon's stern,
her apron wide as its main sail,
my grandmother's magnificent girth
guaranteed my small craft
safe harbor
no matter how rough
the rollicking boyhood seas.

Hiding behind her sheltering vastness,
her double-dimpled arm
crooked back,
her gentle fleshy fingers
running through my sun-bleached hair,
I peeped around her calicoed amplitude
listening intently
as she calmed the tempestuous waters
of parental ire,
knowing all too well
I had earned, with interest,
whatever the storm threatened.

Refuge

The most hardy perennial
in her flower garden,
my grandmother took root
in the thin soil
of a hardscrabble farm
in northwestern Wisconsin
spending what little
spare time she had
pushing her broad girth
through the narrow, meandering paths
of her fragrant preserve,
cooing tender lullabies
to her tiger lilies and hollyhocks.
Asking for little in life,
only once
did she turn supplicant,
pleading with her frugal husband
in the local grocery
for the nickel needed
to buy a packet of seeds,
suffering a denial
derisive and public.
She returned home
hurt and humiliated,
thereafter spending
even more time
among her flowers,
each new blossom
pulling her ever deeper
into its lavish rainbow world.

The Passing

One spring afternoon
my uncle drove slowly up
our gravel driveway,
a thin pall of dust trailing
morosely behind,
to tell us Grandpa
had passed away.
Sad and silent, we followed him
back to where the body lay,
the only sound in our car
my mother's ragged weeping.
Only seven and not yet
understanding death's finality,
I stood curious before
Grandpa's frozen form,
wondering about the room's
stony stillness,
as though all sound
had been sucked from it.
My Grandpa's craggy head
rested deep in the soft folds
of a feather pillow,
his jaw held together
by a white dishtowel
tied in a tight, stiff knot
at the top of his head.
How strange, I thought,
that a man who dazzled all
by speaking a dozen languages,
should be so strangely muzzled,
and by those who loved him most.

Unnatural Order

Losing her mate two long decades before
her own passing, my grandmother,
soft spoken and gentle, spent those
lonely years modeling quiet acceptance,
her tiny single-windowed
upstairs bedroom in my aunt's house
the shrunken world of her existence.
I sometimes served as confidant,
but knew her shy disclosures
came more from the periphery of her heart
than the innermost precincts.

Only at our final meeting did she allow
her soul's door to open a crack.
Pneumonia-wracked, she confided
in a raspy whisper barely audible
that she welcomed her own passing—
a sweet release from the ache of seeing
two of her children precede her in death.

I was in college then and too callow
to fully appreciate my grandmother's
tender revelation. Only now,
as father and grandfather,
do I comprehend the numbing fear
of witnessing an unnatural departure
from the natural order.

Praise

Generous as a spring thaw he was,
in most ways, yet with the praise

a child needs as much as kite its zephyr,
my father was Midas-like, hoarding fast

compliment's golden treasure.
Like a young Hercules I labored hard

at all my tasks just to hear one shining
word of approval, but the best I could

unearth were second-hand kudos
from uncles to whom he boasted

about my good works. Once, though,
when I had stacked several cords of split maple

exactly to his liking, and without his asking,
he put his hand tentatively upon my shoulder,

smiled shyly, and murmured a thanks,
my kite filling, lifting, soaring skyward.

Hands

Shrunken and snowy-white and waxy
were my father's hands as they lay
in silken silence, still and cold as winter's night.
But they were not so in life.

Ruddy, warm, and strong as love,
I can still see my father's hands at work:
lifting rocks other men could not budge
even with help of iron bar; heaving up,
with cavalier ease, ninety-pound bales
to the very top of groaning hayracks;
mixing cement by hand
—day after day, week after week—
to lay the foundation of a barn
all of his own design.

But most especially, I remember
the touch, the snug clasp, of his hands.
Huge and meaty, they covered
my small hands like warmed mittens.

Once, while walking through woods
on a January day too frigid even
for chickadee song or nuthatch peep,
we came, father and son, upon an open
creek, flowing swiftly enough to defy
winter freeze and too wide for my short legs
to bridge. Suddenly, without word,
my father grasped my hand in his,
swinging me, like dandelion fluff,
to the solid safety of the other bank.
Since then life's crossings
have not been so simple, so sure.

Bouquet

The daily walk
from country school to home
was a long one
for the small boy,
but springtime helped make
the journey shorter.
Best of all,
the flowers were back,
even the swamps
turning elegant
with their necklaces
of bright gold cowslips,
and in the greening woods
mayflowers, glowing
pink and white and lavender,
pushed their way
through mulchy roofs.

Bouquet clutched
tightly in hand
the boy raced home
bursting through
the kitchen door
offering his rainbow gift of love,
his mother's radiant smile
surpassing its brightness.

Report Card

In a battered cigar box
pushed far back
in a dresser drawer
I keep an eclectic collection
of memorabilia:
a frayed green freshman beanie,
white plastic tape spelling out
my name; an orange and black
high school sports letter
earned in track; an engraved
silver chain bracelet linking
my name and another's, now
tarnished and dull, but once
as bright as the youthful infatuation
prompting its purchase.

And at the very bottom,
in a tan, slipcase envelope,
stained and smudged
with the fingerprints of time,
my *Eighth Grade Report Card*.
There, under *Comments*,
my mother's handwritten note
in faded ink: *I am proud
of my son's good work*.
Eight words in flowing,
elegant cursive, eight words
that inspired me then,
that inspire me still.

Literalism

Dozing in my favorite easy chair,
unread newspaper on lap,
a gentle tug at my sleeve
pulls me awake.
My toddling daughter,
cherubic face clouded,
relates a monosyllabic tale of woe.

Summoning the pitiful shard
of parental wisdom remaining
at long day's end,
I rub rhetorical balm to the hurt,
assuring her she can *count on me*.

Guileless, without pause,
she puts her tiny finger
to my arm and tapping
from shoulder down
begins reciting her numbers.

Smiling inwardly,
I luxuriate in her literalism,
knowing full well that time,
with all of life's ambiguities,
will complicate our relationship
soon enough.

Geraniums

Tiny and tender
at potting—their pale,
filigreed roots
like the delicate veins
of an embryo—
I gently eased
my geranium seedlings
from their plastic cradles,
swaddled them
in rich, warm soil,
then kept vigilance
with anxious eye,
shielding their vulnerability
from the sudden, stunting
frosts of early May.

Now, in temperate summer,
stems grow strong, leaves luxuriate,
and new buds overlay each verdant mound
like a beaded hairnet
promising a season of vibrant color.

This golden morning,
watering the plants
I love so much,
my thoughts, like flower petals,
unfold to my two daughters,
now both fully grown
and tending geraniums
of their own.

Growing Toward Heaven

*(for my grandparents,
Simon & Catherine Romanowski)*

Side-by-side they lie
in love and peace,
dreaming deep
in dark Wisconsin soil,
each eternal day
in earthy whispers
their sacred vows repeating,

and high atop
the ceiling low
of their quiet,
quiet room,
two stately arborvitae
stretch heavenward
their supple arms,
while reverential roots
tenderly entwine
bones pure white
as Easter's peerless lily.

When Both Have Passed

(for Mom and Dad)

The rooms grow cold
and still as death,
even the strong slant
of sunlight
through south windows
too weak
to lift and warm
the spirit,
to dispel
the darkling gloom.

Gone the living room fern
once the talk
of the neighborhood,
lush and broad beyond belief,
capable of hiding
a ten-year-old
within its lacy circumference,
gone the tantalizing aromas
of frying bacon and baking bread,
gone the worn work boots
standing sentry
beside the kitchen door,
gone the smoked fish
and home-brew
always ready for drop-in guests,

now only a granite slab
where once beat a joyful heart.

Breakfasts Past

Each morning, in the sun-blossomed
kitchen of my farm-boy youth,
my sister and I eagerly awaited
another grand display
of Mom's culinary magic,
amazed at her transmutation
of newly-gathered eggs
into solar systems of bright little suns
and mesmerized by the tantalizing smells
she *abracadabraed* into being:
the exotic spiciness
of maple-smoked bacon,
the yeasty fragrance
of thick hand-cut slices
of homemade bread toasting
in the oven of our old wood-burning stove,
and the earthy aroma muscling its way
from the strong, black coffee
Dad drank from a stoneware cereal bowl,
our coffee cups, though large,
still too small for his liking.

Elbow to elbow we sat,
our poor-as-field-mice family,
enjoying the grace
of loving togetherness,
realizing only decades later
how rare the communion shared.

Those Sunday Dinners

Sunday dinners in our spacious
sunflower-gold farmhouse kitchen
blossomed bountiful
with the savory smells
of roast chicken and clove-studded ham,
crusty fresh-baked bread,
bright yellow yams,
and crumbly-topped Dutch apple pie
still warm from the oven.
Brothers and sisters,
aunts and uncles and cousins,
nieces and nephews—
all swam the aromatic currents,
chattering and laughing and teasing
as Mom sped
from stove to counter to table,
and back again,
sky blue calico apron flying,
always protesting shyly
when we finally settled around
the long, oilcloth-covered table
filled to overflowing
that she knew *it wasn't much*, and
that she *hoped there would be enough*,
while Dad sat at banquet's head
ruddy-cheeked and grinning,
saying nothing,
bestowing an eloquent grace
through his proud and beaming silence.

Family Tree

Blessings on thee family tree,
for roots sunk deep
through sand and clay,
your grip secure
on bedrock slate.
Blessings on thee, grandparents mine.

Blessings on thee family tree,
for trunk so stout
and straight and true,
your pillared strength
upholds us all.
Blessings on thee, parents mine.

Blessings on thee family tree,
for branches fair
and high and wide,
your arms hold trust
and loyal love.
Blessings on thee, siblings mine.

Blessings on thee family tree,
for leaves so green,
so fresh and new,
your budding hope
brings spring and more.
Blessings on thee, children mine.

Love



“And we are put on earth a little space,
That we may learn to bear
the beams of love.”

— *William Blake* —

Aging Companions

We grow old together, my cat and I,
two little old men in late middle age,
gray haired and gray whiskered;

both starting the morning a bit later,
joints a bit stiffer; both visiting the doctor
more often; both appreciating ever more

the deliciousness of naps in the bone-warming
afternoon sun, heads nodding in unison,
limbs twitching from time to time

as we dream of our frisky, caterwauling youths;
both displaying routine spasms of pique
and cantankerousness, and enjoying it,

believing we've earned the right; both
watching more wistfully the falling leaves
drift slow and crimson past the window.

Today, as I gently wipe the corner of one
of my companion's eyes now given
to rheumy weeping, he returns my gaze

from deep jade pools, both of us silent, noting
all the markers, but neither speaking of them,
each too caring of the other's feelings.

Tender Loving Care

Dawn's paint brush
gilding their snowy crowns,
two great blue herons
high atop
a lacy Australian pine
sway precariously,
pendulum-like,
their tensile toes
like steel forceps
gripping
a dead forked branch,
their *sotto voce* squawks
as they begin
to build their nest
soft and tender
as whispers
of mourning doves
cooing love.

Immense spear-like beaks
nimble maneuver
in elegant tandem,
deftly
delicately
weaving the serpentine sticks
into place,
lovingly
as a mother folding
a fleecy blanket
around her newborn child.

Maternal Care

Mother and child,
the dolphins arch skyward
from aquamarine to air
in sweet synchrony,
 vaulting
 in perfect
unison,
one extending the other,
larger dorsal fin forming a path,
baby swimmer
sliding through slipstream
like silken shadow.

Walkers, joggers, shellers—
we all stop to marvel,
 pointing,
 whispering,
wondering.

Even the gulls grow silent,
circle more slowly,
watch the blowhole rainbows form,
one large, one small,
one small, one large,
again and again,
again and again.

Love-struck

(for Twila and Bill)

She knows
full well
he's
out
of town

but
still
she dials
his home
just

so
her lonely
heart
might feel
the sweet

embrace
of his voice
on the
recorded
greeting.

Poetic Courtship

When young Will Shakespeare,
eighteen and pumping testosterone,
skipped faun-like across town
to whisper sweet Elizabethan
forget-me-nots into the dainty ears
of saucy Anne Hathaway
sitting seductively on a love seat
in the violet shadow of her parents'
charming thatch-roofed cottage,
all its straws neatly combed and braided,
I wonder if his passionate
protestations of love
flowed Avon-smooth
in rhythmic ripples
of limpid iambic pentameter,
or, if, in lyrical lilac twilight
when walking bodice to doublet
through the moonlit garden
redolent with primrose and promise,
he blossomed forth
a sweet bouquet
of soulful sonnets before swearing
by the blessed (but inconstant) moon
that he adored her, and then
in an impromptu aubade
(it was, in truth, the lark
and not the nightingale they heard),
assuring her
in compelling couplets
that parting was such sweet sorrow.

Shifting Terrain

The bone-weary young farmer
took in the twilight
on the worn top step
of his open porch,
the deeply-etched trenches
on his leathery forehead
stark, desolate valleys,
each telling a tale
of hard work and hardship,
each testifying
to the cruel stinginess
of steep-hilled hardscrabble acres
more noteworthy
for what they withheld
than what they gave,

but when his children
burst out the kitchen door
freshly bathed and rosy cheeked,
laughing and shouting
“Papa, Papa, Papa,”
flinging themselves
into his arms
and gracing his cheeks
with lavish goodnight kisses,
his brow’s rough landscape gentled,
the sharp-edged furrows
softening into peaceful glens,
melting into tender smiles.

Senior Dance

Each morning,
as the rising sun spreads
its golden dance powder
on the drab concrete slab
beneath a busy traffic cloverleaf
in downtown Beijing,
the elderly tango.

Rush hour's cacophony
nearly drowning out
the sultry sounds
seeping
from two crackling
loud speakers,
the polyester-clad couples,
hundreds of them,
dip and glide,
press sensuously
against each other,
limbs withered,
hair gray and sparse,

but dark brown eyes
sparkling
with thoughts saucy
and pert
as frisking colts
in springtime
mountain meadows.

The Whistle

I whistled
at my wife today
as she walked,
all business,
from house to mailbox,
pretending not to notice
my silliness,
but I caught the smile,
shy as woodland violet,
the little head shake
of mock disapproval.

Later, when I teased her
about it,
she laughed,
reminding me that a man
my age might save his energy
for more practical things,
but I just grinned,
still relishing
the light
girlish step
I saw for a second or two
after the whistle,
still reveling
in the youthful flourish
full of April and daffodils.

Lullaby

*(In remembrance of
William Carlos Williams)*

Even those cold
succulent plums

the poet purloined
from his icebox

lack the sweetness
of tender words

and a kiss shared
at three in the morning

while drowsing in bed,
the soothing lullaby

of distant thunder and
pattering rain

crooning us softly,
slowly back to sleep,

two soulmates
sharing a single pillow.

Buried Dreams

Come follow me
my own true love
down to the land
of buried dreams,

where deep beneath
the rubble drear
of cast off plans
and failed attempts

the pinioned dreams
in yearning wait
for seekers bold
like you and me,

our hope still strong,
our will intact,
our love the spade
that clears the way.

Loving Wisdom

Forehead finely etched
with wisdom's calligraphy,
the old woman sat straight-backed
and dignified in her wheelchair,
alert and listening attentively
to our fuzzy discussion
of the never-ending search
for happiness and contentment,
gracing our remarks,
from time to time,
with supportive nods,
finally quietly observing
that she had little to add
than to suggest that happiness,
like love, is seldom found
if too ardently sought,
that it almost always
comes as a surprise,
like a balmy, daffodil-laced day
after a late April snow storm,
and that just as we accept the grace
of azure skies and sunshine,
so, too, must we blithely embrace
dark clouds and showers,
for love and happiness
are no weaklings,
stout and durable enough to withstand
the mightiest of tempests.

Twilight Tableau

The soft, lavender dusk
falls gently as dew
while mother and daughter
sit swaddled on the open porch's
rocking chair,
kitchen window's silken yellow light
cascading gently down,
framing their love,
illuminating the pages
of a book the smiling mother
holds above the fleecy folds
of a snowy white blanket.
She reads in hushed tones
to the little girl who,
sheltered under her mother's arm
and oblivious to all
but her complete and perfect world,
nestles as content and secure
as a newborn lamb snuggled
in thick maternal wool.

And I, passing by quietly
on my evening walk,
glance discreetly
at the peaceful tableau,
recognizing the moment of grace,
but feeling never more solitary,
never more lonely,
never more left out.

A Mother's Good-bye

(for Debbie)

Like a delicate Easter lily
chilled by spring's late frost,

she bends, limp and trembling,
over her son's still, still body,

pressing her lips gently
to his snowdrift forehead,

so cold, so smooth,
her tears falling on fallow ground.

Placing with gentle hands
a faded yellow baby blanket

around limbs pinioned tight
in death's fierce embrace,

she tucks in her son, snugly,
tenderly, for the very last time.

Love's Meaning

(for Marijean)

When I looked into the mirror
this morning,
you looked back out,
and, finally, I understood,
without doubt,
the meaning of love.

Finally, I understood,
without doubt,
that just as waters
of small streams conjoin
to form rivers wide and deep,
our loves have coalesced
to form something greater
than both together.

Finally, I understood,
without doubt,
that only when two kindred souls
grow old together,
sharing joy and sorrow together,
knitting their lives together,
becoming indissolubly one,
can true love be said to be.

Love's Paradox

That is what I imagine love to be:
incompleteness in absence.

— *Goncourt* —

Dawn unfurls
her pastel ribbons of rose
and peach and lavender
over a tide-smoothed beach
so peaceful even the garrulous gulls
stand mute,
heads bowed in respectful silence,
while in the western sky
an unbelievably
thin sliver
of crescent moon
hangs by an invisible thread.

And I,
I stand
solitary and still
as heron
on morning hunt,
my appreciation
of the beauty before me
halved
by a love so complete
only the sharing
can make whole the pleasure.

Convergence

(for Marijean)

Your days,
 your years
overarch mine
like a newborn rainbow,
your love's genial prism
refracting, expanding my joy.

Your days,
 your years
weave through mine
like silver threads
in a Flemish tapestry,
forming the weft and warp
of my life.

Your days,
 your years
wind through mine
like a placid woodland path,
yesterday crowned
with springtime buds,
today with autumnal gold,
but no matter the season,
always mantled in love.

When Love Abides

(Point Lobos, California)

They sat on a worn cypress bench,
her hair white, his the same,
serene in the slant sun
of an early spring afternoon
on Big Sur's rugged red rock coast,
the only sounds
the lonely cries of wheeling gulls
and muted crash of surf,
the sea's primordial metronome.

Content they were
to be where they were
who they were
with whom they were,
her eyes closed
head in his lap
his right arm holding
her snug and secure
holding her close,
dozing together
in May's soft, warming sun,
two lengths of weathered driftwood,
perfectly shaped
by time and togetherness
to fit into each other's arms,
to support each other
no matter how uncertain,
how perilous, the seas.

Continuum

"Endings become beginnings."

— *Tao Te Ching* —

When I my leave
eternal take
nor mind, nor husk
remaining

look still for me
my soul mate dear
in tender dreams
that bring sweet tears
new memories
creating

and watch for me
at twilight time
in sylvan glade
where first we kissed
and kissed again
romancing

for I'll be there
in spirit true
the pregnant hush
between the notes
of your life's song
our timeless love
sustaining.

Remembering Our Song

“Canadian geese mate for life, with the male singing one part of the song, the female the other. After a mate dies, the survivor sings both parts.”

— *Diane Ackerman* —

When you or I may cease to be,
our two-part harmony cut in twain,

the abiding half, I hope, will not forget
the lyrics of our joyful lifelong song,

pausing now and then in the frantic push of life
to keen the melody that sped our dance,

and on some still, moon-silvered night,
memories stirring like ghosts among the trees,

I would not think it odd if spouseless mourner,
eyes shut tight and head thrown back,

howled sadly at the icy stars above,
like a sorrowing wolf bereft of mate.

Serene Passage

(for Ethel Gillett Allen)

She seemed
to be sleeping,
her deeply
furrowed forehead
becoming
somehow smoother,
more youthful,
with each shallow breath.
Eyes still closed,
she lifted her arms
heavenward
in joyful recognition
of someone beckoning
from some pacific realm
only she could see.
The corners of her lips
turned coyly upward
in bashful school-girl smile
as she whispered softly
her parents' names,
then gently floated away
like an autumn leaf
in a tranquil woodland brook.

A Child's Lament

(for Catherine Zahorski)

Six days and nights
she could not eat
her flesh so thin
the bones shone through:
*We love you, Mom,
but please let go.*

We sat around
the stark white bed
her hands we held
her hair we stroked:
*We love you, Mom,
but please let go.*

Her shallow breath
grew short, grew short
but still her heart
kept up its beat:
*We love you, Mom,
but please let go.*

Our tears fell fast,
we all embraced
our love at last
had set her free:
*We love you, Mom,
God rest your soul.*

Enduring Love

And palm to palm is holy
palmers' kiss.

— *Romeo and Juliet* —

Hair white and fluffy
as the Gulf clouds
floating high above,
stoop-shouldered
as the pelicans lounging
on the surf line,
the old couple shuffles
down the beach
arm-in-arm,
each leaning inward
for support,
shrunken hands
entwined tight as grapevine,
loving eyes
meeting,
mirroring
each other,

while in the sun-sparkled
turquoise shallows
just off shore
a pair of dolphins leap
in joyful celebration.

Portraits



“The reason some portraits don’t look true to life is that some people make no effort to resemble their pictures.”

— *Salvador Dali* —

Mourning for Willy

This sweet-scented morning,
fragrant fields of clover
touching shoulders
with honeysuckle hedges
and cardinal's call
riding sunbeams
through the spicy air,
I think of poor Willy Loman,
sad and suitcase-weary,
his house a little coffin
with just enough dirt
around it to plant
a few seeds, though destined
never to sprout,
and I long to take him
by the hand
while walking slowly
through the verdant whelm of spring,
the lilac and lavender dawn
spreading like flute music
from horizon to horizon
across the beckoning,
unencumbered, expansive land,
helping him realize,
before the dark,
that free and clear
he finally is,
yes, free and clear at last.

Starry Night

(St. Paul-de-Mausole Asylum)

How lonely, how lovely
must have been
that long, long night
in your tiny
white-washed cell.

Just you
and the pregnant darkness,
the stars, sunflower bright,
whispering their ancient language,
a venerable cypress
unfurling its lacy fans
into the amethyst heavens.

Through the small
barred window
you watched evening's undulating tide
come rolling over
the silent, sleeping town,
your brush strokes moving
swift and fierce
as the raging mistrals
of your tempest-tossed soul.

Love Letter to Vincent

(Auvers-sur-Oise)

Since you've gone
the sunflowers
have lost their gold
and the starry nights
have turned
dark and cold,

but I know,
yes, I know,
you have earned
your rest,
and I am happy
that you and Theo
now lie side-by-side,

your souls
forever entwined
in the gently
 girdling
 ivy
of Dr. Gachet's garden.

JFK

White teeth flashing
in winsome schoolboy smile,
jaunty and urbane
in navy blue pinstripe suit
starched white shirt
deep crimson tie
brushed gold cuff links
glinting cool and rich
in the slant fall sun,
JFK shook my hand
like it was the only one
in the world worth holding,
promising cloudless days
and Camelot
in that firm, confident grip.
Then, the gunshots.

In my mind
I felt again the warm press
of his handshake,
saw again the dazzle
of his boyish smile,
heard again his strong voice
full of rocky New England shorelines
and surging Atlantic waves,
the hope of Camelot
now oozing into nothingness
like stale air escaping
from a punctured balloon.

Jimmy, We Miss You

(James Dean, September 30, 1955)

Cruising drive-ins
with a carload
of high school buddies
radio blaring to the max
a newsflash cuts
through the rock-and-roll
like a stiletto
shutting up even the wise guys
yakking in the back seat.
Who could believe it?
Our main man
hippest of the hip
coolest of the cool
leader of the pack—
the Dean was dead!
Jimmy, you know
we wanted you
to stick around longer
but somehow
it seems just right
you speeding
into our lives
and racing back out again.
The memories are all
right here, Jimmy,
bright and hot
as your groovy red jacket
and nobody,
not even you, Jimmy,
can touch them now.

Still a Hit

(*Manhattan*, 1975)

Early Sunday morning
and all quiet on Fifth Avenue
except for a few taxis
prowling for fares
in the December cold.
Striding towards me,
a tall, lanky, handsome man
immaculate in gray sharkskin suit,
crisp white shirt, navy blue tie,
his step limber and easy,
twice as long as mine.
He nods a friendly hello,
flashes a toothy smile,
but although familiar
I cannot quite place
the face until a cabby,
half hanging out the window,
breath smoking in the frigid air,
yells, "Hey, Joe, how ya doin?"
Like a smash
into the upper bleachers
my mind connects:
Joltin' Joe. The Yankee Clipper.
Of course! DiMaggio!
Still looking oh so good
and still hitting
homers with all his fans.

Humility

(for Boyd Voelker)

The fish swim everywhere,
Undulating sensuously,
catapulting forward,
meandering lazily through reed beds:
schools of plump bluegills
push upward
from the cool depths
of the vaulted great room
their tiny pouting mouths
resolute, their button eyes
wide and unblinking;
toothy northern pike,
sleek as submarines,
stare stonily
from behind the cover
of flower arrangements;
and on mahogany table tops
dark as silted river bottoms,
channel cats and sturgeons doze
stolid and lethargic.
When I ask my neighbor,
genial and unassuming creator
of the exquisite black walnut sculptures,
how he does it,
he simply shrugs his shoulders,
looks down at the floor, and murmurs,
Oh, it's simple, really.
Yes, I muse: simple as transforming
one of my pathetic stick figures
into Michelangelo's *David*.

Hope Springs

Fifty-something,
plain, shy, and awkward,
a little frayed at the edges,
she had *heart for sale*,
immediate occupancy possible
posted on her yearning face
for as long as we could remember,
but the few responding to her ad
sought only rentals,
short-term leases,
settling in for a while,
then absconding without notice,
leaving all in shambles:
no forwarding addresses,
no explanations,
no apologies.

She never lost faith, though,
our small-town princess,
tried not to let the hurt show,
simply tidied up her posting,
ever hopeful the next prospect
might sign a long-term deal,
might become a permanent resident.

Aftermath

The burns had erased all
the familiar topography:
only little nubbins left where ears
once had been, neither
eyebrows nor lashes remaining
and beneath that void
two shallow hollows
harboring dark brown pools,
her little, round, one-time face
pallid, creamy smooth,
scar tissue stretched tight
as latex, forehead furrowless,
only the thin reconstructed lips
mimicking faintly their former self,
the only color present
two circles of cheek rouge:
the afterglow of sunset
in a stark winter landscape.
She sat alone, this stranger,
in the front pew,
shoulders slightly hunched
staring straight ahead
softly intoning
Jesus loves me this I know.
I sat two rows behind,
but wished I were beside her
clasping her trembling hand
tenderly in mine,
whispering, *Sister, we're sorry.*
Oh, sister, we all love you so.

Rain Woman

When my melancholic aunt
slump-shouldered her way

into our home to get her monthly
hair setting—a gift my mother

freely gave, year after year—
gloom rolled in behind,

her self-pitying stories sighing
like winter wind over barren fields,

whining shrill over hills of complaint,
languishing in tear-drenched valleys.

When, at last, soggy and sniffling,
she drifted out the door like a mildewed

late autumn leaf, a new front blew in,
sullen storm clouds melting away,

sun pouring through the windows,
a rainbow forming over our doorway.

Dandelion Woman

Raised on a Kansas ranch,
she was of hardy pioneer stock
this tall, grass-blade thin, leathery
old woman, and smart, too,
a school teacher who never quit
teaching, never quit asking questions.
Only one vice did she possess
as far as we could tell,
and that was an unbridled lust
for ravaging dandelions.
For some reason beyond the reach
of botanical logic
her little trailer-home yard attracted
dandelions like a bird feeder draws
squirrels, and she relished the challenge,
contorting her stringy body
into a question mark
as she yanked out the little suns
invading her universe.
Even the mention of dandelions
placed her on the cliff's edge
of apoplexy, her face reddening,
bulging veins tracing her turkey neck
with purple embroidery.

Today, when I visited her grave,
I found no sign of dandelions.
They wouldn't have dared.

Indomitability

(Chicago O'Hare Airport)

Her silver curls
tight as clock springs,
old-fashioned reading glasses
clinging to the end
of her pudgy nose,
cheeks rouged with concentration,
the tiny woman leans tight
over an intricate needlepoint,
a caravan of pink frogs,
red crayfish, and sea-green crabs
hop, scoot, and scuttle along
a dark blue banner
draped over her knees.
She tucks bony elbows
snug to her ribs
straining, straining, straining
to still her trembling hands,
but the tremors
are not to be denied.

Oblivious to those milling about,
nose nearly touching
the frog's head emerging,
she shepherds her creatures home
undaunted by her hands' betrayal,
each colored thread
pulled straight, taut, and true,
a jubilant triumph.

Dancing at Dusk

(Dufferin Terrace, Quebec City)

A slant April sun dusts the boardwalk
smoky gold as lights wink
on in shadowed houses
across the lacquered fleure St. Laurent
while a distant accordion
whispers a lover's melody
to an evening soft as kitten's fur.
Delicate and mysterious
as midnight moonbeam,
a white-haired woman
in a black silk dress of another era
drifts onto the wooden promenade
smoothly swaying to the music.
She dances alone
oblivious to stares
her tiny, crinkled face
tilted shyly upward
deep gray eyes fixed
on something far, far away.
Then a slender young man
joins her, clumsily copying
her graceful moves,
she paying no attention,
still lost in another world.
A hush falls over the terrace
as the old dancer's eyes,
glistening in the violet dusk,
remain fixed
on some sepia-tinted memory.

Perfect Grammar

He practiced perfect grammar,
we all agreed,
and not one of us
had ever seen
a single strand
of his sparse gray hair
out of place.
A carefully trimmed mustache
covered an upper lip predisposed
toward patronizing sneers,
especially when we students
turned paralytic
during his caustic
classroom interrogations.
One sport jacket he possessed,
and two age-shiny bow ties,
one grey, one black,
the latter always worn giving
and returning examinations,
a calculated adornment
aptly depressing and funereal.

Dr. Ice, for that is what we called him,
died in middle age grading
a stack of student essays,
still not one hair of his comb-over
out of place,
our response to his passing
equally as restrained.

Green Light

Like poor Jay Gatsby
he squandered his years
seeking the green light
at the end of life's dock,
blind to the rainbow
of love and devotion
in his own backyard.
Gilding his life
with all that glittered
and riding his ambition
like one of his many thoroughbreds,
he galloped through life
too fast to see what really mattered,
until one night after a typically
long stay at the office
he found the table still set,
the wine poured,
the china shiny with hope,
and nestled in a fruit basket nearby,
like a poison apple,
his wife's bitter note of good-bye.

Now, alone and lonely,
clenching truant wisdom tight
as a drowning man a buoy,
he tells his doleful story
over and over
during *happy hour* at the local bar.

New Kid

Thin and spindly as a spider crab,
the new kid went well beyond *hayseed*
into a rare type of gawkiness
defying taxonomy. His worn bib overalls
hung scarecrow-loose on his boniness,
his feet sockless, chafed ankles raw and red,
his scuffed army boots scabbed with
barnyard detritus, and he smelled —
crappy as a chicken coop, we smirked.
Oh, he was straight from the boondocks
alright, and we eighth graders never tired
of making him the butt of all our horseplay
and cruel jokes. We knew an easy target
when we saw it. One late afternoon
I walked into the boys' john and there he was,
bibs crumpled around his feet like a dirty diaper,
our principal scrubbing layer after layer
of caked excrement from the kid's buttocks.

We three looked down at our feet,
no one saying a thing and I never shared
the story, even though I knew the guys
would have loved the ammunition.
Actually, I didn't even know what
to think or feel about what I'd seen.
But, now, I wonder what each of those layers
had cost the new kid's spirit, and my own.

Past Prime Time

He stopped me on the sidewalk
with a grin and slap on the back,
but I didn't recognize him
at first,
although something about
the gravelly voice and bird-like tilt
of head seemed vaguely familiar,
like an old farmhouse
on a lonely stretch of country road
remembered because of its oddness.

Bald he was, and flabby,
his potbelly hanging over his belt
like a sack of garden mulch,
and when he laughed
the fatty folds of his neck
shook loose as a turkey's waddle,
his breath erupting in wheezy,
convulsive spurts.

An old high school buddy,
it turned out,
who used to run the mile in track
—and in record time, too.

Ancestral Wisdom

Our guide prepared us well
for the natural wonders of Guilin,
and we saw them all
as our gleaming tour boat
slowly wound its way
up China's twisting Lijiang,
cutting through the shadows
of the primordial limestone karsts,
like giant thimbles
thrusting skyward
from ancient sea beds.

But she could not prepare us
for the reed-thin elder,
stiff and angular as weathered driftwood,
standing still on the pebbled shore,
a knobby bamboo yoke
pressing down on his sharp,
bony shoulders,
tethered cormorants
squatting like ebony gargoyles
on each end of the crossbar,
their neck waddles
vibrating like tuning forks,
the old man's deep brown eyes
rainbowing a gentle wisdom
far too subtle
for our obtuse Western minds.

Music's Kiss

Our garden toad was more outgoing
than my Uncle Leonard.
The toad, at least, croaked
and looked you in the eye,
while at family get-togethers
my uncle would sit in the darkest corner,
Sphinx-silent,
thin lips sealed bank vault tight,
starched shirt collar buttoned snug
as a hangman's noose,
his eyes cast downward
studying the carpet's pattern
as if its map might reveal
some escape route from conversation.

But with a bow and fiddle
he was the Hallelujah Chorus,
all hosannas and exultation,
small round spectacles flashing white fire,
forehead furrows dancing like summer waves,
chin making mad love
to the fiddle's curvaceous body,
face sweet and soft as honey.

And there you have it:
toad made prince by music's kiss,
his transfiguring eloquence
stunning us all into squat silence.

Epiphany Sunday

As rhythmically
as faithfully
as a beating heart
the young mother
runs three middle fingers
slender as
comb's teeth
through her daughter's
thick brown hair
thin furrows forming
then flowing back together
like prairie grasses
parted by a gentle breeze
adoring fingers never
losing their tender touch
softly running through
the child's hair
as rhythmically
as faithfully
as a beating heart
the homilist recounting
Mary's undying love
for her son.

A Child's View

(for Isabella)

Granddaughter cradled
in my arms, I stroll
the lush Gulf shoreline
hoping for a memorable sighting:
a snowy egret or white ibis, perhaps,
or a sleek dolphin blithely nosing
through placid turquoise waters.
But nature's cupboard
seems bare this morning
and so we head back home,
resting for a moment
beside a sea grape hedge row,
burnished leaves
glowing copper red
in dazzling sunglow.

A tiny hand reaches out,
takes a glossy leaf
between Lilliputian fingers,
turns it over and over again,
studying intently its veins,
cooing over its metallic sheen,
keenly examining
each minute detail
like an explorer
poring over the map
of some exotic new land,
while I relearn grace's meaning.

Lament of St. Francis

I stand before the simple tomb
of good St. Francis,
imagining his stigmata
casting a soft phosphorescent glow
on the thick rock walls
of his tiny room,
his large brown eyes
peering out far beyond
the midnight dark
of the adamantine confine
he now calls home,
far beyond to the grand rolling hills
of his beloved Umbria,
the lush meadows dancing
with a host of wildflowers,
his out-of-doors heart
yearning
for the fragrant open fields
but taking solace
in the companionship
of his four beloved confreres—
Leone, Masseo, Rufino, and Angelo—
all sleeping snug and serene
in their cells close by, sharing
his dreams and love and friendship
now and for all eternity.

Easter Sunrise

*(Upon visiting Pope John Paul II's tomb,
the Vatican, April 2010)*

I walk slowly down
the subterranean avenue
of popes, their sarcophagi
stately and aloof
in the muted light
of the twilight grottoes,
each somber effigy
cast in perpetual shadow,
lonely folk all,
few visitors stopping to chat,
few awaiting their mute benediction,

but then, ahead,
a throng of pilgrims
standing shoulder-to-shoulder
crowd the red velvet rope
between them and a modest marble slab
devoid of sculpted mask or epitaph,
its only ornamentation
a name in Latin,
IONNES PAVLVS PP. II,
followed by
the years of birth and death,
and illuminating the whole
a transcendent radiance,
like the warm and luminous glow
of the rising sun on a clear
and promising Easter morning.

Sound Portraits

Cricket's chirp, cock's crow, wind's whisper,
all the sounds of earth, perhaps even
the crystalline hum of heaven's spheres, all
these he could hear, but then the unthinkable,

the sounds receding, growing ever fainter,
ever more distant, like a loved one saying
good-bye, carriage moving farther and farther
down the road, never to return, and, finally,

absolute silence, the stillness of dolomite,
of midnight tombs, of snowdrifts. But even
lonely silence invited images, and in they danced,
taking up lodging where sound once lived,

musical notes hanging from branches like candied
apricots, etching ivory with melodic scrimshaw,
illuminating creamy parchment, frosting
ambrosial pastries. Cymbals' crash, bass's rumble,

trumpet's fanfare, dynamics and pitch, tone
and resonance, all now occupying his mind like
a gallery of sumptuous paintings, filling
it like flood to overflowing, the notes spilling

onto the page, forming the magnificent *Missa
Solemnis*, the radiant string quartets, the majestic
Ninth Symphony, and a legacy that might
have surprised Maestro Beethoven himself.

Nature



“I go to nature to be
soothed and healed, and to have
my senses put in order.”

— *John Burroughs* —

The Feasting

A dozen cedar waxwings
explode from February's charcoal sky,
swoop into a berry-filled mountain ash
and there hang from its boughs
like Christmas ornaments,
their black masks and yellow-banded tails
glistening bright as hope
against the snow-pillowed branches,
their sleek bodies bobbing like corks,
passing berries one to another,
sharing dinner stories
in their lisping vernacular.
Faster than holiday they came,
and as fast departed,
flashing heavenward
in shriek and golden flutter,
only a scattering of burnt-orange shards
on the crusted meringue below
reflecting their visit.

I remember well, at winter's advent,
how distasteful the thought
of cleaning the rotted berry drop
in early April, but now
I think only of bird laughter,
joyful sharing, and grace-laden feasts.

Florida Sketches: Dawn

1. A lavish drift
 of glittering shells
 bejewel a tide-washed sand flat
 as a harvest moon slowly slips
 into quicksilver waters,
 while in the east, far across the bay,
 the rising sun
 muscles up a golden ladder
 of striated cirrus,
 my gaze torn between
 the two extravaganzas.

2. Three white pelicans
 sail smooth and stately
 across a placid bay,
 silvered wake trailing behind
 like a coronation robe,
 their bearing as regal
 as royal swans,
 which they fancy they are.

3. A lone great blue heron
 steps slyly
 stealthily
 in slow, slow motion
 through still, mirrored waters
 as if stalking
 his own ghostly shadow.

Florida Sketches: Dusk

1. A lazy vee of white pelicans
 slowly makes its way east
 across the shadowed harbor
 to leafy bedrooms
 in the labyrinthine branches
 of red mangroves,
 the smooth, sleepy flaps
 of their broad wings
 create the only breeze
 ruffling reposing waters.
2. A pink hibiscus
 blushes bright
 as the soft fingertips
 of the setting sun caress
 its smooth, creamy petals.
3. The magenta and lavender
 backdrop of the soft twilight sky
 puts motionless palms
 in exotic silhouette
 forming a postcard photo
 sure to draw envy
 from friends back home
 shivering their way to mailboxes
 barely peeping out
 of waist-high February drifts.

Great Blue Heron

Still as death
he stands alone
stiletto beak
poised to stab
sinister
spring
of neck
cocked
aimed
ready—

while playful
minnows
frisk blithely
in the warm shallows
edging toward
the seeming shelter
of a long
thin
shadow
supported
by
black
bony legs
too
stiff
to ever bend
in prayer.

Pomp and Circumstance

(Gasparilla Island, Florida)

Majestic and resplendent
in snowy drifts of regal robe,
golden-slippered King Egret
stalks the salty periphery
of his sandy, shell-lined realm,
his imperial dolphins
bucking and bowing
as they gallop through
lapis lazuli waters.

A venerable white pelican,
his trusted court counselor,
waddles close by his side
philosophically contemplating
the recondite windings
of a delicate wentletrap,
and a few flaps behind,
a gaggle of royal terns,
chalk-crested heads
perpetually bobbing
in perennial acquiescence,
fawning courtiers forever
courting preferment.

While high overhead,
an entourage of wheeling gulls
stridently announces
his majesty's royal progress.

Surprise Visitor

A delicate emerald ampersand,
the grass snake lay tidily looped
in the middle of the concrete garage floor.
Still as death she was,
not even a tongue flicker,
her black granite eyes studying me
with fierce attention.

My shy guest's presence took me back,
decades back,
to my first encounter
with one of her kin,
when as a young farm boy pulling grass
from around the elms in our lawn
I felt, in a bulky handful,
a sudden writhe and thrash and curl
between my panicked fingers,
my primal scream
propelling my mother,
face blanched with fear,
nearly through the screen door.

But how very different this mild encounter,
how much more polite, cordial, and serene,
although still with ample heart race,
still with the deep respect
a slithering thing always brings.

A Curve on the Road

Triangulate head,
gray mottled body
thick with muscle,
four pale gold knobs
on tail's end,
oh, it was a rattler, alright,
that swamp-loving fellow
the Ojibwe call *massasagua*
—*large-mouth river*—
forming a lazy S
on the warm blacktop road
but a few minutes
from our cottage door.

It's a wonder, I say,
how a mere curve on the road
can change one's relationship
with the land, how walking
through the long meadow grass
suddenly becomes an adventure,
how logs
once stepped over
with nonchalance
now call
for cautious circumnavigation,

how all senses stay on high alert
even when the path seems clear.

Grace Notes

Luminous notes hang
like Chinese lanterns
from the hawthorn branches
he calls home.

Each sunrise he greets me
with his fluty tremolo,
and though we have not yet
formally met,
having attended dozens
of his concerts
the wood thrush
is like an old friend to me.

I long to knock on his door,
just to say hello,
but always think better of it,
knowing how embarrassed
this shy songster might be,

and so I resume my walk,
but reluctantly,
each cheerful note
bidding me tarry,
each cheerful note
signifying how congenial
must be the home
filled with such sweet music.

Paean to Progress

A moving carpet
of brown and olive green,
leopard frogs
capered and chanted
their croaky roundels
all through
the meadows and marshes
of my farm-boy youth,
joyful troubadours
gamboling about
in such abundance
each of my steps
threatened musician
mortality.

But the greenswards
lie quiet now,
the mirthful minstrels
gone,
except, of course,
for a few improved models,
some with five legs
to move all the faster,
some with two heads
to better sing in tandem
their doleful ditties
to progress.

Arctic Birth

(Resurrection Bay, Alaska)

Glistening diamond white
and turquoise blue
in the dazzling arctic sun,
the massive glacier
hangs above our boat
like a beached leviathan,
overshadowing us
as we goggle upward
straining to see the release
of the newborn,

when, suddenly,
icy birth moan
followed close
by sharp crack
of splitting ancient snow,
then plummet flash,
the bellowing
thunder of protest
when shuddering calf
explodes the frigid bay,
rainbow spray christening,
commanding reverential silence
that holds, and holds, and holds
while the glittering baby
gently rocks in its lapis lazuli cradle.

Sea Otters

(Prince William Sound, Alaska)

The sea otters bob up
and down like corks,
sunlight glistening silver
on their silken coats:
living rafts gently undulating
in crystalline arctic waters.
Languidly they drift
with the currents
like carefree little old men
on perpetual holiday,
only their round, whiskered faces,
pot bellies, and folded paws visible
above their soft waterbeds.
Their midnight eyes
sparkling with mischief,
they smile coyly as if to say:
*Don't you wish you, too,
could have a life like mine?*

Floating and frolicking
from dawn to dusk,
rocked to sleep
in cozy kelp cocoons
by mother sea,
the otter's life is the life for me,
but one not so easily lived
in a world less *As You Like It*
and more *King Lear*.

Yellowstone by Night

Awed into silence,
we walk slowly
through a lunar landscape
of bubbling mud pots,
steaming hot springs,
and hissing fumaroles,
floating vapors spectral in
the harvest moon's
translucent light.

Suddenly, a bison
pushes out from willow shadows.
Silver-dollar eyes
glowing like struck flint
in the thick moonlight,
he pauses
only long enough
to cast a glance
of mild disdain
then fades into the gauzy mists,

while from earth's ancient lungs
come sighs
of sad remembrance
when craggy beasts
once strolled like royalty
across pristine plains.

Bison

Oh, what must it have been like
to have seen the wide, wide reach
of prairie alive, moving, undulating
from horizon to horizon
like a brawny, black-brown tide,
the earth shaking, shaking, shaking,
hoof-thunder heaving heavenward,
dust rising higher and higher,
the massy, shaggy heads,
powerful humped shoulders
pushing, pushing, pushing forward,
frenzied, focused eyes blood-red,
dangerous . . . determined,
oh, what must it have been like?

Southern Live Oaks
(*Houmas House Plantation*)

Their long, tan, gnarly arms
hairy with silver-grey Spanish moss,
the ancient live oaks
stretch farther out than possible,
supporting themselves
on slender wrists
drawing strength from Louisiana's
rich, black, alluvial soil.

Two rows of magnificent convolution
form a sun-mottled leafy tunnel
ushering in cool, spicy big river breezes
that dance a stately minuet
to, and into, the sprawling mansion's
grandly porticoed main entrance,
refreshing more completely
than the finest mint julep
sipped slowly on languid,
cicada-whirring summer afternoons.

Elms

Like elegant guardian angels,
their bouffant coiffures
beaded with oriole nests, elms
watched over my farm-boy childhood,
and, later, in college,
they were there for me, too,
high-arching branches
like graceful parasols
converting campus greens
into shady sanctuaries
where serenity, colloquy,
and romance flourished.

The loneliness I felt
on all my travels away
from my snug Midwestern home
melted like April snowdrifts
when once again I drove
down elm-canopied streets,
the overhanging branches whispering,
Welcome back, son. You're home again.

Now, in my autumnal years,
I take joy in remembering
the leafy grace of those *grand dames*,
and of a more innocent time
when hope and possibility
rainbowed above me
like the outstretched arms
of those stately, sheltering elms.

Mr. Thoreau Writes a Poem

Natural and free it must be,
flowing blithe and wild
as a frothy forest stream,

at times rushing forward
in riffing rapids
diamond flecked
with sunshine shards,

at others languidly easing
into eddies still and deep,
the artless philosophy
of its underlying currents
coaxing strollers on the bank
to stay and think awhile,

but most of all,
pure and sweet the waters,
their unsullied, honest flow
around each willowed bend
creating crystalline music
that soothes the soul.

Mr. Muir Ponders a Poem

Like one of Nature's temples
I want my poem to be,
its granite lines solid
and enduring as El Capitan,
its rhythm as natural
as waves lapping the shores
of a spring-fed mountain lake,
its form stout and grand and enduring
as a heaven-seeking sequoia.

Not for the timid lowlander,
nor the valley bound,
this soaring poem of mine,
but rather for those willing
to scale the heights,
to risk the ethereal,
the earth's wildness,
to carve a path
through the vast unexplored
with enduring Faith as compass.

My poem shall be a journey
we make together,
your hand in mine,
my words the footholds leading
surely, resolutely,
to the majestic summit.

Ebony and Ivory

An unlikely vee it was
gleaming
in the early morning sun,

a fusion,
a gay profusion,
of snow-white pelicans
and ebony cormorants
sliding south over the river
toward shared feeding grounds,
wings pulsing
in harmonious unity,
a smoothly functioning blend,
differences in color
and background
mattering not a whit,

a hopeful message writ large
against the clear, rosy dawn.

Feathered Foils

Five young ibis frolic
in a wide-spreading mangrove tree,
their snowdrift feathers holding
gold from the sinking sun,
crescent noodle-beaks
clicking staccato
like Spanish castanets
against the dancing branches
as they play hide-and-seek
amidst emerald leaves,

while tombstone silent
on a dying, leafless branch
devoid of festival,
a great blue heron,
rapier-beak
pointing sharply downward,
hunches alone,
stolid and statue-still,
stern eyes
unblinking,
staring straight ahead,
somerly daydreaming
of some lushly-minnowed,
frog-hopping lagoon,

disdainful of the frivolity
cascading around him.

Bondage

The massy Bengal tiger
paces back and forth,
back and forth,
in the hot, noonday sun,
panting thickly,
saliva dripping on the dust below,
his grimy orange-brown coat
inches from the rusty iron bars
separating his world
from mine.

He swings by heavily
never varying an inch
from his repeated route,
making the same turn,
always in the same way,
his flaccid swag belly
swinging loosely back and forth
like a tawny metronome.

And in those unblinking eyes,
those steady, dreadful eyes,
deep, deep down
in those amber pools,
I see gently swaying grass,
bamboo brakes
growing free and wild,
thick-fingered mangrove swamps,
and the cool, beckoning,
jasmine-laced shadows of home.

Possum Crossing

The paunchy possum waddled
nonchalantly onto the walking trail,
wiry splotches of matted gray-white hair
sparsely covering a pale, scabrous body,
her long ratty tail hanging
limply behind like a worn,
bleached piece of rope,
her mouth flashing a foolish, toothy grin.
Both man and beast stopped short,
studying each other.
Minutes passed.
Finally, eyes blinking in closure,
the possum ambled away,
pausing now and then
to look back over her shoulder,
as if bidding a regretful farewell.

I stood unmoving for a while,
wondering why this shy,
nocturnal creature
had made its bold visit
in bright spring sunshine,
why she had chosen vulnerability
rather than the safety
of nearby woods,
but like snowflakes on April soil
my questions quickly dissolved,
in their place simple gratitude
for a precious moment of grace.

White Pelicans on Holiday

(Fox River, Green Bay)

I've seen them
skim, skim, skimming
the waves,
gyroscopes calibrated,
not a fraction
of an inch
to spare,
and dive bombing
for fish dinners with
retina dislodging plummet,
like lead pulled hard
by some irresistible magnet
beneath the water's surface.

But, today, long journey over
and safe in their summer home,
they celebrate—
slowly swimming the air
in easy, lazy circles,
coasting on the currents
for the sheer fun of it,
for the sheer capricious joy
of blithesome buoyancy.

Pelicans

Dumpy and awkward,
pelicans perambulate
with oafish shuffle
(duck-waddle squared)
and at sea, no better,
podgy corks bobbing about,
pump-handle beaks
thrust downward
like obtuse divining rods.
Dockside, these jesters
of the jetty seem always
on the hook-end of mischief,
catching cast baits
in midair,
flummoxed anglers reeling
in the protesting pilferers
from high above.

But once airborne
ungainliness becomes grace,
buffoon becomes ballerina,
prose becomes poetry.
Whether soaring high
with artless ease,
or skimming the waves
by a hairsbreadth,
pelicans on wing are a miracle,
a silken melody.

Sturgeon Spawning on the Wolf

(Shiocton, Wisconsin)

Like knotty, sunken logs
the prehistoric fossils
face the swift April current,
undulating slowly,
ever so slowly,
over groomed gravel beds
soon to cradle
a multitude of progeny.

Their generative galliard
completed,
the spent
fresh-water leviathans
turn downstream
and head for home,
proud and passive,
never pausing
to return the gaze
of puny humans
gawking and gesticulating
on crowded river banks,
not at all interested in connecting
with a land-locked
Johnny-come-lately species
far better at ending life
than beginning it.

Birthing Room

(Sanibel Island, Florida)

A sultry Florida afternoon,
saw grass and palmettos drooping
under the sweltering sun, soundless
but for the muted crunch
of sand under foot
as I stalk shy roseate spoonbills,
my camera at the ready,
but sighting, instead,
a large female gopher tortoise,
straddling a deep,
clawed-out hole,
laboring mightily in solitude,
one egg,
one push of sand,
another egg,
another push of sand,
a mesmerizing primordial pavane,
only the slowly oozing teardrops
rolling softly down
mottled cheeks
disclose the mother's
fierce labor.

I slowly back away,
retracing my steps
on the sanctuary trail:
no photo taken,
sharing this intimate moment
more than reward enough.

The Kindness of Flowers

When I grow so old I cease to be,
upon the kindness of flowers

I shall depend, seeing the birds
and cobalt sky through the daisy's

brown eye, soaking my toes on hot
afternoons with marsh marigolds,

sipping cool, refreshing drinks
in the pitcher plant's parlor,

borrowing honey for tea
from the sweet clover's larder,

curing my ills with motherwort pills,
and finding my way through eternity's

long day on the compass plant's arm,
when I grow so old I cease to be.

Travels



“The world is a book,
and those who do not travel
read only a page.”

— *Saint Augustine* —

Spanish Tour

The tour bus swallowed Spain's
highways like a hungry python,
surging through the hilly,
sun-flowered countryside
from city to city,
disgorging us in front
of yet another stunning structure:
Barcelona's *Plaza del Rey*
with its necklace of medieval towers,
Madrid's Royal Palace and Prado,
Granada's fountained Alhambra,
Seville's towering Minaret,
Toledo's commanding Cathedral

— we gaped in awe at them all,
but thinking back
I remember best
a volcanic sunset over Cordoba,
its fiery reds burning the sky
in cosmic conflagration,
magentas, scarlets, and sapphire reds
shifting and streaming and flickering
like an aurora borealis
sent straight from Hades,
all human creation
paling before the sun's apocalyptic fire
slowly sinking behind the *Sierra Morena*.

Dining on the Danube

Resting their puffy breakfast bellies
atop the mahogany deck rail
and burping their contentment
in the cozy warmth
of the mid-morning sun,
the river cruise passengers
gaze languidly
at the Danube's unhurried waltz,

while on the rough-hewn pier
gaunt street dogs,
ribs showing beneath
scruffy, matted coats,
sit patiently
on their bony rumps,
ears perked
eyes riveted
on the ship-to-shore gangplank,
waiting since dawn
for the ship's *maitre de*
to bring out the *entrée du jour*,
a large blue mixing bowl
slopping over
with last evening's
leftovers,
the salivating guests
little concerned about
elegance of presentation.

Shoes of Sorrow

We blithely strolled
through charming Budapest
until upon the banks
of the dark, blue-black Danube
we chanced upon a row of iron shoes,
three-score or more,
sad and lonely looking
even in the bright, waltzing sunlight,
a bronze plaque
solemnly telling a tale
of war-time horror,
dozens of barefoot innocents
shivering on the banks
until countrymen's bullets
toppled them into watery graves.
We stopped
before the smallest pair
of sculpted sorrow,
in our heavy silence imagining
the child's imploring look,
wondering eyes gazing up
at Mama and Papa,
each holding tight
her tiny, trusting hands
in the confusing seconds
before her dream of life
drowned in the weeping waters
of the dark, blue-black Danube.

Li River Diptych

(Guilin, China)

1. In the coned shadows
of lofty limestone karsts
standing sentry
on both sides
of the meandering Lijiang,
wizened old women,
faces wrinkled as dried plums,
squat stolidly
over their meager wash,
rubbing threadbare cloth
against ebon stones
smoothed by jade waters
flowing soft and steady
through the millennia.

2. Small groups of burnished
water buffalo seeking refuge
in the cooling currents
move slow as cloud,
dreamily chewing
succulent tendrils
cropped from aquatic pastures
languidly undulating
in time's turquoise flow.

Rhine River Vineyards

Fingernail-roots scratching
through thin slate soil
on nearly
perpendicular
river-edged hillsides,
the ancient Roman-bred vines
lock arms
for support
in improbable vertical rows,
clinging to the steep, stingy earth
with mountain goat tenacity,

while on still, moonlit nights
the neat, lean plots,
shimmering silver,
stand silent and alert,
listening for Lorelei,
her copper-gold tresses
star-wreathed
as she keens
her plaintive song
of yearning and woe,
even squeezing
a few granite tears
from the rocky throne
upon which she reclines
eternally forlorn.

Sorrento Aubade

Sorrento's morning song begins
with a pair of rival roosters
echoing each other's
shrill announcement
of daybreak, followed close
by church bells clanging, chiming,
calling out like shepherds
to straying flocks,
and joining in from all corners
of the awakening city, the dogs—
oh, the dogs—like Aeolus' bag of wind
untied, their barks rush out
into the fragrant, lavender air,
bombarding the city with a barrage
that jackhammers the brain,
and, finally, the Vespas and their kin
join the cacophony—coughing,
whining, backfiring, hiccupping,
roaring, snorting—no space left
it would seem for another note
in the raucous Sorrentine symphony,

and, yet, in the dewy lemon trees,
the shy mourning doves softly coo
their silken matins with the demure ardor
of nuns on pilgrimage.

Anacapri

High, high above
the turquoise Tyrrhenian Sea
I stand atop sweet-scented Monte Solaro,
the opulent fragrance
of jasmine and almond,
camellia and oleander,
wisteria and bougainvillea
adrift on the gentle breeze,
the heavily-laden lemon trees
glowing yellow-gold
on the lush, wooded slopes.

From far below,
where the green-blue waters
break upon the rugged Faraglione,
I seem to hear
the ancient siren song so strong
even mighty Ulysses could resist
only after being bound to the mast
by his stalwart crew,
their own ears
stuffed with pallets of wax,
appreciating now,
as Capreae's voluptuous embrace
holds me willing captive,
the fierce seduction
they faced so long ago.

Under the Boardwalk

Dusk settles on the beach
as I shuffle through the sand
back toward the boardwalk,
the hazy sunset eclipsed
by the cascading glitter
of Casino Row's gaudy facades.
When I reach the steps
I see them—calicoes, ginger,
tabbies, shorthairs—
cats of every size and color,
lounging, playing, grooming,
rubbing against posts, some
haughtily returning our stares.
Fat and sassy they are,
not a rib showing,
their feeders and water bowls
full and clean, the floors
of their cozy bungalows
carpeted with fluffy blankets.

As I leave Atlantic City,
I think neither of the garish
pleasure domes shouting
their hollow promises,
nor of restaurants
full-bellied with buffets,
but rather of cats,
hundreds of contented cats,
in a snug village under
their echoing boardwalk sky.

Sloth Sighting

(Selva Verde, Costa Rica)

Leisurely as cloud drift
she slow motions down
from one eucalyptus branch
to another and yet another,
her shaggy, little
upside-down darling
clinging so tightly
to her mommy's tummy
one cannot see
where mother ends
and baby begins.

On the path below,
frenetic tourists
on winter holiday
dart about
like homeless ants,
bumping elbows,
tripping over tree roots,
pressing
for the best camera angle,

while far above,
intertwined with fragrant leaf,
mother and child
chew contentedly
to the slow, slow swing
of a wiser metronome.

Faux Paradise

(St. Maartens, Caribbean)

Their bony rib cages
like the ragged hulls
of shipwrecks,
the gaunt, hopeless dogs
haunt my dreams.
Night after night
I watch them
fighting
for the final lick
of rancid residue
on some rusty
soup can,
hollow bellies
low to the ground,
scrawny rumps
rhumbaing
in perpetual grovel.

The dogs know
what travel brochures
fail to tell:
there really aren't
any cheeseburgers
in paradise,
hunger
forever remaining
the boss-man.

Invisibility

(Marigot, St. Martin)

Like land-locked reflections
of the snow-white yachts
sparkling on the lapis lazuli bay,
the gated mansions clinging
to the lush slopes high above
gleam coldly,
their grand balconies
jutting out
like the imperious chins
of pompous aristocrats.
Our sprightly tour guide
proudly cites the stellar costs
of the breathtaking villas,
enjoying our gasps,
while on each side
of the narrow, winding road
scrawny bantam roosters
peck at scanty crumbs
on the earthen floors
of doorless shanties.

But this destitution
we pass in silence,
all attention riveted
on the jeweled hills,
fantasy happily
checkmating reality
with a wink and nary a nod.

Switzerland by Air

A pastel checkerboard
reminiscent of Ireland,
but neater still,
precise
in that frugal,
punctilious,
singular
Swiss manner,
the ordered
topography
groomed
and
demarcated
with
watchmaker's
ex-ac-ti-tude,
not one corn stalk
out of place,
tidy farms
yodeling
(discreetly)
to each other
across the verdant valleys,
well-disciplined herds
of dreamy-eyed Brown Swiss
perfectly positioned
in the painterly landscape,
even the cloud shadows
graze like well-behaved sheep
over the snug, smug land.

Dichotomy

(Varna, Romania)

The ramshackle Gypsy homes
hang suspended
on the steep hillside
like an arrested avalanche,
cracked and jagged roof tiles
scattered around the crumbling
stucco foundations,
ragged piles of refuse
tilting downward,
all life aslant,
families crouching
torpid and destitute
in suffocating shadows,
seeking escape
from the stifling midday heat,

while a few blocks away,
on the chic Black Sea beaches
nude sunbathers
greedily soak in the sun,
backs fried dark
and crisp as pork rinds,
their Porches and Mercedes
parked nose to tail
along the narrow cobblestone streets,
the posh boutiques
gleaming cool as diamonds.

Pearl Harbor

Like
black
tears,
oil
droplets
sigh
to the surface
from the U.S.S. Arizona's
broken body

while
flower wreaths
bob up
and down
upon
grieving waters
each
genuflection
honoring
the dead.

Land of Broken Dreams

(Normandy, France)

Between the sheer cliffs
of Omaha Beach
and the placid fields of blood-red poppies
lies a land of broken dreams,
its lengthy rows of bone-white crosses
stretching out toward the horizon
like the ghostly arms
of sorrowful supplicants.

There, in twilight's hush,
the drooping forms
of dreams denied
hunch forlornly
on the cold marble markers
murmuring
in sad, sibilant chorus
the mournful refrain
of joys
that might
have been.

Tiananmen Square

(Beijing, China)

The colossal image
of Mao Tse-tung,
China's jowly Big Brother,
stares down sternly,
while boyish, green-clad soldiers,
backs stiff as dogma,
goose step
to the boom and crackle
of piped-in martial music.
Then, from out the crowd,
an old Chinese couple
shyly approach my wife and me,
bow low and ask
to have their picture taken
with the two of us.
We gather close,
our arms like rainbows
thrown across each other's shoulders,
while their grandson,
camera aimed and at the ready,
urges smiles already there.

When we hug each other
and say good-bye
even Chairman Mao's resolute lips
seem to soften and curl upward
at the corners,
a faint smile beginning to form.

The Great Wall

We step onto
the thick, slate-scaled dragon
seeing neither beginning
nor end
and ride its undulating back
over mountains steep
and gorges deep,
bridging roaring streams
while moving backward,
ever backward,
through silken millennia,

until, at last,
we meet
great Emperor Qin Shi Huang,
sipping fragrant jasmine tea
in the perfumed shade
of a spreading magnolia,
his broad brow furrowed,

determined to devise
some rare wonder
to make immortal
the life of his dynasty.

Little Bighorn

How hollow the victory
would have seemed
to Crazy Horse
and his warriors
that hot, bright June day,
the gunpowder murk
and riders' dust
hanging thick as Hell smoke
over the bloody ridge,
the acrid air
ripe with death shrieks.

Yes, how hollow the victory
had they known
the very land
for which they fought
and died
that afternoon
was already being pulled
from beneath their feet
as surely
as the Little Bighorn
ran placid in its pebbled bed
beside their teepees
set close as tombstones.

Gettysburg

Spring songs of wren and robin
float like pastel kites
over fields perfumed
with lilac, dogwood, and honeysuckle,
over pastures verdant and peaceful,
where a few generations earlier
twelve thousand soldiers in gray,
most no more than boys,
marched in rows like summer corn,
shoulder-to-shoulder,
their surging lines shredded
under the hail of rifle fire
and grapeshot, their dreams
evaporating like morning dew.

Attired in a park ranger's uniform
crisp and sharply creased,
our guide casually points
to the field where showers
of young Southern blood
watered the roots
of daisies and Queen Anne's lace,
narrating mechanically
the terrible toll of Pickett's
terse command,
while a gaggle of laughing students
run and tumble
through the green-gold meadow,
gleefully following their teacher's
directive to reenact the charge.

Chicago Morning

The city yawns,
stretches its brawny arms,
fills its great lungs
with the Lake's invigorating air,
then exhales
with a whoosh through toothy grates,
its morning breath
heavy with the sleep
of garbage-canned alleys.
The waking sun chins itself
on horizon's cobalt bar,
its rosy cheeks melt away
the tattered, gray night clouds,
and bright-eyed condos
overlooking the Drive
flash gold and vermillion.
Cars flash by fast and anxious,
sirens wail, gulls shriek,
the giant's pulse quickens,
even the fog flexes its muscles.

No docile cat padding
on soft paws
this city of the Magnificent Mile,
but rather a lion
pumping the heart blood
of a robust nation.

On First Visiting Wrigley Field

(for Bill Meo)

The field's lush grass
turns to vine and runs up
the outfield's walls,
ivy fingers reaching
to the scoreboard
toward which the Babe
once pointed.
Seeing, hearing it all
for the first time
from the upper deck
on an azure August afternoon,
national anthem
sending chills,
magical arc of a home run,
the seventh-inning stretch,
Harry Caray's owl-bespectacled
spirit leading us
in a rousing *Take me out . . .*

all this I will remember,
but most especially,
snug as a line drive
nestled in a shortstop's mitt,
I carry with me the memory
of father and grown son
walking down the ramp,
arms over shoulders,
their Cubs' caps touching.

A Grand Performance

At dusk, when the setting sun
exploded upon the Canyon walls
in a fiery flourish
of reds and golds and hot pinks,
I stood mute
in protracted awe,
confident that nothing,
absolutely nothing,
could match
this bravura performance.

But next day
when morning slowly
drew back her gossamer curtain
revealing a pastel palette
of spring-bud greens,
lilac and lavender bouquets,
and delicate swirls
of antique silver and pearl
all played over by wispy clouds
moving in and out
of the Canyon
like echoes of rainbow,
I knew I had been graced
in being wrong.

Chartings



“Nothing in life is to be feared;
it is only to be understood.”

— *Madame Curie* —

Chartings

In bucolic boyhood's
dew-decked morning,
curiosity full to overflowing,
my chartings were depths
of pond and lake,
meanderings of creek and river,
annual treks of wren and robin,
and joy there was in such recordings.

In teeming noon of adult life,
work days full to overflowing,
my chartings changed
to dreams and schemes,
hopes and plans,
goals and yearnings,
and joy there was in such recordings.

Now, in twilight's golden glow,
life's long book filled to overflowing,
I chart fond memories
of foreign travels logged
and friendships gained,
of laughter savored, love secured,
and joy there is in such recordings.

Through a Glass Brightly

Through the thick window pane
we stared at each other
the housefly and I,
he on the outside looking in,
and I looking out
from a cozy studio flat
high atop Chicago's Hancock.
What, I wondered, was my little alien
doing here at these heights,
tiny membranous pads
suction-cupping him to a slick surface
swept by fierce, unrelenting winds,
diaphanous wings lifting, dropping fitfully
on straining exoskeleton hinges,
his geodesic-dome eyes
glowing copper and carnelian
in the slant mid-morning sun?
Like Sir Hillary had he ascended
the mountain just because it was there?
Like Lucky Lindy had the challenge
of a solo flight never done before
seduced him? Or, like Icarus,
had he simply wished to test his wings?

Whatever the reason, I hoped
someday to beat my wings as fast,
dare soar as high as he.

Death of a King

(Navarre Beach, Florida)

Bereft of entourage
the fallen monarch lay dying
on the ermine-white sands,
his radiant orange and black robe
loose and fluttering
in November's biting wind.
Gently, I lifted him
from his lonely bed,
holding him in the warmth
of my sheltering palm,
but still only a faint pulsation
his wings yoking tight
like two hands in ardent prayer.

On the very crown of a sandy rise
I placed the lifeless king.
Throne rather than bier
I wished the dune could be,
but better yet, how lovely
would have been a happy consummation
of that long royal progress
back to ancestral mountains,
where, on some lush oyamel fir
he would have alighted,
delighted to join his peers
for a genial holiday
under Sierra Chircua's golden sun.

Mindfulness

The daybreak clouds,
pink and silver gray,
shift, swirl, swim sinuously
across the eastern horizon
like a school of salmon
in a lavender sea.
Even the stolid headstones
in the hushed cemetery
stand transfigured,
dawn's light so radiant
it seeps into stony pores,
glowing iridescent
from deep within.

And sitting relic-still
on the grassy mounds,
like wisps of morning mist
become petrified rainbow,
the silent citizens
of that silent village,
now relieved
of frenzied pace
and with time enough to spare,
intently watch
life's singular kaleidoscope
with rapt attention,
eyes transfixed, unblinking.

Frigate Birds Off Antigua

They
hang
taut
as
kites
on
invisible
strings,
neither
wing beat
nor
head twitch
announcing
flesh and blood.
When at last they sail,
it is only to glide languidly
from one thermal to the next
on their high, calm cerulean sea,
having learned early on
that contentment comes not
from pushing against the current,
but rather from going with the flow,
from living in the moment,
mindful,
not one feather ruffled.

Montezuma Castle

(Verde Valley, Arizona)

High above the verdant valley
with its slow moving, meandering creek,
the peaceful Sinagua farmers
carved their five-story home
into the cleft of a sheer cliff wall.

Why and when
they left their lofty dwelling
remain a mystery,
the sun-drenched, airy rooms
now occupied only
by sleek cliff swallows,
their showy dives and rapid climbs,
joyful chirps and flashing wings
a poignant reminder
of the vibrant life
that once must have filled
the now vacant space
solemn and still as a sunflower
on a cloud-filled day.

Redwoods Reverie

Late December in Muir Woods,
the stately redwoods mantled
in fog so thick it falls in a steady drizzle
from the needled canopy looming
far above like a giant umbrella.
I have come to the Woods by bus,
part of a boisterous tour group,
but from the moment we step
into the forest's absolute quiet
the loud talk and laughter
become infrequent whispers
and, soon, whispers give way
to profound, reverent silence.
The redwoods embody majesty,
even the bark, deeply-fissured,
nearly a foot deep, demands awe,
its vertical canyons alive
with creeks of tannin-laced water,
diverted now and then
by great burls flexing their muscles
on the swarthy-skinned trunks.

These woodland Titans
remind me of our puniness,
standing so tiny here
beneath the benevolent wide spread arms
of ancient beings preceding us by centuries
and, if left in peace,
succeeding us by even more.

Good Friday in Old San Juan

(Puerto Rico)

Scourged and jeered,
the *faux* Christ reels
down St. Cristo Street,
back ketchup red,
brow circled
with dime-store thorns,
eyes rolling
dramatically
upward,
seeking answers
in the unruffled cerulean sky.

On both sides
of his lurching body
ice cream and
cotton-candy vendors
work the festive sidewalk crowds,
while curious tourists
in glow color
I Survived San Juan T-shirts
lounge in bistro doorways
sipping watery pina coladas
from plastic beer cups,
their fashionably sandaled feet
tapping to
the raucous
rhythms
of Caribbean cha-cha-cha.

Flowering Desert

— *And the desert shall rejoice
and bloom as the rose.* —

(Isaiah 35)

Parched and languishing,
I wandered over desert drift
pushing through cactus spine
and wounding thorn
searching for water
to slake my thirst, seeking
shade in which to rest.

And, then,
with the turning
of a page,
my desert bloomed
as I read
the gentle wisdom
of the abbas and ammas,
their words like rain
on the arid sands,

ushering spring
into my soul.

Boat Lunch

When my father and I went fishing
he cobbled our lunches together
on the way to the lake.

A tiny, weather-beaten general store
provided saltines, hard salami, and beer,
and a cheese factory no bigger
than our house added gleaming wedges
of peppery cheddars and creamy Swiss.
Around noon, if the fish weren't biting,
my father would put down
his cane pole, dig a worn jackknife
from his hip pocket
and slice the savory cheese and salami
with surgical precision,
placing the pungent morsels
between flaky white crackers.
While we munched the crumbly
delight, Dad would punch open
an ice-cold can of Walter's Beer,
handing it over every so often
so I could take a sip,
glistening drops of condensation
running coolly down my wrist.

Since then I have eaten costlier lunches,
and in far more lavish settings,
but none more cherished
than those simple repasts
shared while fishing with my father.

The Visitor

Dead for over a decade,
my father visits me still,
not only in my thoughts and dreams,
where he shows up regularly,
at times just to say *hello*,
sometimes for a longer chat,
and once to say a final good-bye—
returning a short time later,
thinking better of it—
but also in my body, yes,
my very corporeal being,
in the squint of my eyes
bristle of my beard
tilt of my head
sound of my sighs.

Now you may say
that all these visits
are simply figments
of an overheated imagination,
and maybe so,
but I think I know better,
for you see,
my father was a genial man
who always enjoyed our visits
and simply sees no reason
for stopping now.

Absolute Magnitude

One-by-one, the stars in her constellation
winked out, leaving a heaven
once radiant, dark as midnight tomb.
Father, mother, husband, brothers,
sisters, lifelong friends . . . all gone,
their fire snuffed into ashes,

but still she remains the epicenter
of her children's solar system,
their mother sun: providing warmth,
illuminating their orbs,
inspiring the music of their spheres.

Sacrament

Her face glowing softly
as nimbus in the warm, yellow light
of our old farmhouse kitchen,
my mother, gagged and bound
by five strokes,
sits prisoner in her wheelchair
at the worn wooden table
upon which she placed so many meals
for her husband and five children.
Now, she depends upon others
to feed her and to be bathed before bed.
I take a soft pink washcloth,
moisten it with lukewarm water
and begin gently laving her face.
Pushing back her sparse gray curls,
I move the cloth across her forehead,
then down each cheek,
and then lightly, ever so lightly,
over the delicate, transparent skin
mantling her arching nose blade.

Although she cannot speak, her look,
shy and wondering, tells me
she is as intrigued as I
by my tender anointing,
both mother and son sensing
the unspoken bond of loving grace
transcending words,
no matter how well-chosen and wise.

Portent

Looking like demitasse cups, fairy thimbles,
hummingbirds' nests, the Queen Anne's lace
along the walking trail turns introspective,
filigreed parasols folding up and inward,
contemplating their inner being,
content after a spring and summer of expanding
to contract before winter's cold,
their timeworn worlds now smaller and softer,
a little more ragged along the edges,
their energies devoted to legacy, to leaving behind
something that will grow, something that will remind
passersby that a thing of interest and beauty
once existed here, took the sweet sunlight
on this sandy bank of time, long after seed nests
burst in November's ravaging winds.

I confess to having paid little attention
to this charming roadside companion before,
to its comeliness, its remarkable shape changing.
But I do now, this soft September morning,
along with the goldenrod's molten glow,
the aster's rich lavender, the cattail's plumpness,
the deep cerulean sky, the air pregnant with merging
aromas of life and death, and the age spots, earthy
color of falling oak leaves, overspreading my hands.

Wolfe's Caveat

For years I revisited
the haunts of my youth
with the eagerness
of a salmon returning
to home stream,
never tiring, it seems,
of rediscovering
memory's hurtful tease,
painting the past grander,
painting it happier,
making it seem
that going home again
is something more
than a hope-filled dream.
But now, even the thought
of such sentimental sojourns
fills me with melancholy,
anticipating memory's
artful deception,
knowing most of those
I long to see again
are gone, or dead, or dying.

And so I have vowed to forgo
such morose journeys, paying
my house calls only in mind,
forever keeping whole
the beauty of my idyllic memories.

Evolutionary Hangover

It's all there,
nestled snug and sly
in the ancient pulp
of atavistic stem
connecting
brain and cord,

all there,
the swift reptilian swing
of head
when surprise overtakes,
the cortisonal surge
of fight or flight,
the drive to play,
to mate,
perchance to dream
the night away,

all there,
the magnetic pull
of liquid cradle,
the potent primeval pulse
of antediluvian waves
breaking on the primal shore.

Bottom Leavings

I saw a lake drained once,
its bottom rich with rusted treasure —
rods and reels, lunch buckets,
fish stringers and tackle boxes,
anchors held in the snug embrace
of stubborn cedar roots,
even an antique motor or two,
one with boat's support board still
in clamps, two bony hands
clutching a broken promise;
and a multitude of puzzled fish,
all swimming frantically in circles
tight as hangman's noose, gulping
for air more liquid, eyes goggling,
wondering who had lowered the ceiling.

Yes, that was quite a sight,
but the mind's opaque pond,
now there would be a draining
of some real curiosity,
the flotsam and jetsam of life's rough seas
sunk to the sludgy bottom:
cast off relationships, abandoned values,
leaden anxieties and fears,
seaweed enwrapped secrets,
along with a scattering of hopes and dreams,
their broken bodies buried in the mire,
only their tiny hands visible,
reaching upward, ever hopeful.

Snail Wisdom

The snail tracings shine silver
in the early morning sun,
twisting and turning,
and turning back again,
like the meanderings
of contemplatives on retreat,
or the windings of desert fathers
following the dictates
of spiritual labyrinths visible
only to them.

I stride over the glossy lacework,
pressing briskly forward
maintaining a strict pace,
no pausing allowed,
timing myself,
aiming for the ideal pulse rate,
but with every step
I feel a stronger and stronger urge
to slow my insistent
inner metronome,
to veer off willy-nilly into
the gold and crimson tranquility,
there to make angel wings
in the liberated,
liberating autumn leaves.

Building Bridges

I should like to be a builder of bridges,
starting small with a fallen log across

some sun-dappled woodland brook,
a simple overpass to explore a side

of nature yet new to me; next, perhaps,
a continuous truss resolutely spanning

the divide misunderstandings create;
and, finally, a grand suspension

arching strong yet supple
on sinewy steel cables calibrated

to flex and sway with the errant winds
of change and time, but anchored fast

to withstand the stress of connecting
thought to thought and soul to self.

At a Sanibel Bar

He sat at the bar
straight-backed and dignified,
index finger running idly
around and around
a near empty glass of wine,
his watery blue eyes
fixed on another time, another place.

A dozen years had passed
since he walked from hospital's gloom
clutching a plastic bag
of her intimate possessions—
watch, wedding band, wallet,
lipstick, toothbrush, family photos.

A dozen years, but still not long enough
to push the loneliness
from companionless rooms
of a dream beach house
planned by and built for two.

A dozen years, but still not long enough
to dull razor-edged memories
of a spouse lying cold
beneath Illinois earth—
a premature retirement for which
none of the books on the Golden Years
had prepared him.

Final Reunion

(for Marijean)

When we meet again
beyond this life
my love and I

will the warmth
of flesh
be thought passé,
the cool of spirit
all the rage?

Will our memories
of joy and bliss
be full erased,
a tabula rasa
in their place?

Will our sacred vows
still vise-like hold?
Or null
become
in vow-less void?

Or will we love
just as before,
our hearts
content
for evermore?

Circularity

While wading the sheltered
brooks of callow youth
my restless thoughts
swam swiftly seaward,
blithely departing the placid pools
of absolutes and certitude,
seeking instead
the broad, uncharted waters
where capricious currents,
turbulent and uncertain,
ran swift and wild and deep,
promising adventures of the mind
impossible to find in the landlocked
backwaters of farm boy youth.

Now, having swum my fill
in the rough, briny oceans
of unfathomable ideology,
my thoughts, like sleek, silver salmon,
come swimming back
to their crystalline birth streams
fanning with gentle, maternal care
the old, fruitful certainties
resting on the snug and cordial
creek bottoms.

Whimsy



“Laughter is carbonated holiness.”

— *Anne Lamott* —

Dream Vision

Moon music floated down in swirling shower
from the silvered, shining sky,
its ethereal notes as soft and sweet
as whispered echo's sigh.

As dulcet drifts formed deep and wide,
I merrily tumbled in
making angel wings and somersaults
till the Milky Way ran thin.

Mutual Agreement

Our aging tabby
saunters into the room
with regal swagger,
leaps cavalierly
onto my lap,
circles round and round
looking for the sweet spot,
finds it,
licks his paw
once or twice
with smug
authority,
then closes
his eyes
in sleep,
disdaining
to acknowledge
my plebeian presence,

knowing
full well
both of us
understand
—without question—
that in this realm
only one king,
one king alone,
rules.

Elegy for a Guinea Pig

A rainbow of earth tones
spliced with bands of white,
Petunia, our guinea pig,
was as charming and mischievous
as she was colorful.

Clown and acrobat
rolled into one pudgy body,
she was frolicsome as spring,
running in circles,
kicking up woodchips
for the sheer joy of it,
nibbling everything in sight.

One evening, a fold
of my wife's new long dress,
sunshine yellow
with a bold flowered print,
slipped over the side
of Petunia's cozy home,
providing a snack
impossible to resist.
In seconds, she added
a scalloped crescent moon
to the garment's floral design.

Alas, a few days later,
Petunia died in her sleep:
from a surfeit of flowers,
we all like to think.

Deluge

Last night, in sly silence,
without a single lightning

flash or thunder boom,
the dew fell in torrents,

an apocalyptic deluge
worthy of serious ark talk,

flooding the grass
with liquid silver so thick

I dove in and took a swim
across my lawn, and back again.

A Rainfall to Remember

*(A record cold spell, January 2010,
Gasparilla Island, Florida)*

A child noticed it first,
the reptilian rainfall
in the midst of an uncommon chill,
and ran to tell her mother,
who, incredulous,
opened the door to pretend a look,
gasping discreetly at the sight.
How could it be? Cats and dogs
she had heard might fall from the skies,
frogs and toads in tornado's wake,
and even pennies from heaven,
but iguanas? Impossible!
The wildest bromides
never presumed such hyperbole,
and so she refused to believe,
though a score of the dazed
little dragons littered her lawn,
still others clinging tentatively
to willowy banyan branches,
tails hanging straight down
like gray-green, knobby icicles.
*You'd better come in now, before
you think it's raining lizards again,*
the mother cautioned,
blithely returning to her chores,
the child still puzzling over
such meteorological vagaries.

Canasta at the Surf Line Café

Like rumpled old men
five disheveled brown pelicans
squat lumpily
in a lopsided circle,
sparse white hair
damp and wind-tousled,
all nose and sharp chin,
necks pouchy,
heads bent thoughtfully
over a languid game of canasta;
one, shy and nervous,
constantly bobbing
his little round head
up and down
as if repeatedly
saying, *Yes! At last!*
to a winning hand;
two others,
stolid and slump-shouldered,
their black-button eyes
staring straight ahead,
poker-faced;
the remaining pair
dozing,
dreaming contentedly
of joker-rich hands,
their fellow players
oblivious
to their drowsy disregard.

Shoreline Symphony

A lone cormorant,
dignified in black,
stands still and stern
on a driftwood dais,
eyes closed tight,
wings spread wide
like the arms
of a conductor
preparing
an orchestra
for the opening
note
of a grand symphony,

while on the shoreline
a neat row of eight ibis,
resplendent
in their white tuxedos,
bright orange bows
at the ready,
eagerly await
their maestro's signal
for the music
to begin.

Beneath the Leaves

In the sugared shade
of wild ginger's
dark green
whorled forest

an extravagance of ants
dance tipsily
from tiny flower
to tiny flower

sampling each luscious
belled honey pot's
dangling dewdrops
of intoxicating nectar,

a Dionysian little commune
of sweetness and frantic joy
celebrating spring's rites
with a pollination polonaise.

Silken Contentment

The father, squatting on the stoop,
ponderous potbelly resting
comfortably on his spindly legs
like a black cooking kettle between
andirons, fixed his large, bulbous
eyes on his son, spinning yet
another oft-told tale of a life full
of hardship and uncertainty.
*Too many times to tell I never knew
where the food for you and the rest
of the family was coming from, he
mused in a wheezing lisp, and many's
the time we've had to depend upon
the kindness of wandering strangers.
The weather hasn't helped none
either. Wind's the worst. Repairs
needed on the roof nearly every
day, and no money for ladders.
But, son, it ain't been all that bad.
Lots of surprise visitors dropping in,
some sticking around for quite a spell,
and each morning when I see the dew
sparkling silver from every eave
of this here house of ours, there's nothing
I'd rather be than the plain, old
garden spider I am, even if it means
never knowing where the next meal
is coming from, and even if it means
always just hanging on by a thread.*

Holding Pattern

The mall walkers
swish past
in their denim
and polyester
like planes in
in a holding
pattern,
circling
more
and
more
slowly,
until the smell
of coffee
in the droning
food court
brings them
gliding in
for a soft landing.

Conical Conundrum

What is it
do you
suppose
about
the rhythmic
lick
on
an
ice cream
cone
that transports
us into
a bovine
trance,
eyes
vacant
staring
into space,
elbows
propping
our frozen
bodies
into place?

Shell Farmer

(for Alison)

I farm the narrow acres
from morning till night
and harvest the shells
as they roll into sight.

I pick olives and figs,
apple murex and snails,
nutmegs and pear whelks,
all by the pails.

My tools are my drills,
also my miters and augers,
I write checks with my pen shells,
and pay bills with sand dollars.

My crops give delight
no matter the season
and I think living inland
defies all rhyme and reason.

Sundials tell my time,
conchs serve as my phone,
and when my farming's complete
angel wings shall carry me home.

Pearls of Wisdom

Oysters, by their very nature, are good listeners,
learning early on that there is virtue in keeping

one's mouth closed most of the time, and even if life
gets a bit gritty, rather than complain they layer

what's bothering them with coats of patience
until, like craggy alchemists, they transmute

base materials to enduring, iridescent beauty;
but their wisdom does not end here,

showing us, as they do quite naturally, the value
of strong and lasting attachments, along with

the folly of thinking the seaweed is always greener
on the other side, content instead to find a cozy lot

and stick with it, not needing a realtor to remind
them of the importance of location, location, location.

And when they snap their little coffin doors shut
for the very last time, gentle ocean currents floating

like crystalline hymns above them, I suspect it is
with quiet acceptance and without the slightest regret.

Solstice Dinner Party

Their jaunty black berets
gleaming in the stark winter sun,
high-spirited chickadees
flit from bough to feeder,
and back again,
oiled sunflower seeds
held firm in little vice beaks,
while nuthatches, elegantly
attired in silver-blue tuxedos,
defy laws of gravity,
swallowing suet upward,
every full stomach a miracle
in their upside-down world.

On a nearby tree
a band of downy woodpeckers
hammer out
their staccato polkas
of festive joy,
an exuberance beneath the dignity
of three solemn cardinals,
 chests proudly puffed out
under scarlet holiday vests,
pontificating in melodious voice
on the seasonal significance of solstice.

Letter to a Seagull

Forgive my bluntness, but I must
report that from wren to eagle all
the birds are gossiping about you

and your kin, telling of what a falling off
there has been. Once you tore the silk
of ocean sky with dive and swoop,

but now you plod behind the farmer's plow,
rummaging with lowly grackles among
earthy furrows for worms and grubs;

once you wheeled free and wild
above crashing waves, but now
you scrounge for scraps in dumpsters

so putrid even buzzards turn their backs;
once you followed the billowing
sails far, far out to sea and pushed through

jagged winds to meet the ships upon return,
but now you play the fawning comic beggar
at picnic bench and wayside table;

and, yet, it is still your haunting cry
that echoes in my yearning heart when
memories carry me back to coast and sea.

An Oenophile's Lament

Three decades it took me
to learn about *aeration* and *appellation*,
bouquet and *body*,
maceration and *meritage*,
nebuchadnezzar and *noble rot*,
tannin and *tartrates*,
varietals and *vintner*,
and now that I know
Chardonnay from Chenin Blanc,
Gamay from Gewurztraminer,
Malbec from Merlot,
Shiraz from Sangiovese,
and actually believe
that a wine sports *legs*
and truly can be
flinty and *floral*, *grapey* and *grassy*,
herbal and *hollow*, *leafy* and *lean*,
even *tight*, *tinny*, and *toasty*,

I simply can't afford,
to buy the kind of wine
I've learned to love.

Mr. Einstein Ratiocinates a Poem

Form and function
I will strive to equate.

Superfluous (e)motion
I will eliminate.

Sound thoughts
I will ensure predominate.

Time, space, and mass
I will poetically contemplate.

Defunct ideas in my lines
I will not replicate.

How matter and energy combine
I will stanzaically illuminate.

Someday what now resides
within my pate
like this brief poem (I hope)
will fascinate.

Flamingos

(Disney's Animal Kingdom)

A flock of flamingos
preen and squabble,
their curious and curiouiser
croquet-mallet heads
moving to and fro
impossibly fast
like out-of-control
metronomes,
stubby wings
opening and closing
in scarlet dazzle,
raspy, raucous squawks
creating a blizzard
of uproar,

while a few feet away
two prim roseate spoonbills,
heads tucked cozily
beneath feather-pillow wings,
sleep contentedly,
as if the Tower of Babel clamor
were Brahms' *Lullaby*.

Seasons



“To the attentive eye,
each moment of the year
has its own beauty.”

— *Ralph Waldo Emerson* —

“The days will grow to weeks,
the weeks to months,
The months will add themselves
and make the years.”

— *Alfred Lord Tennyson* —

January

Janus,
two-faced
god
of new
beginnings,
how smug
you
must be
presiding
over
each
new
year
knowing
your
month
will
always
come
first.

Donut Holidays

When fierce January blizzards
chewed on the corners
of our small Wisconsin farmhouse,
building snowdrifts that reached the eaves,
we would coax Mom
into making a batch of donuts,
a sure-fire antidote
to the cabin fever setting in.

Out came the big yellow mixing bowl,
in went the flour, sugar, and secret spices,
and soon she was spooning
creamy circles of donut batter
into a heavy cast iron skillet
rolling and popping with boiling-hot Crisco,
while around the well-worn table,
eyes big and glistening and eager,
we sat spellbound, pondering her alchemy,
hardly able to wait
until we could dip the magical orbs
into our bowls of sugar and cinnamon,
those fragrant, puffy rings
uniting our home-bound family,
taking the unruly North Wind's
keening breath away, ushering spring
into our warm and cozy kitchen world.

Portals of Yearning

Throughout the deep freeze
of northwestern Wisconsin winters
our leaky farmhouse windows
became fairyland fields
of glinting, gleaming frost,
the crystal crop so thick
mere scraping failed to clear
even a small chink of vision,
and so my sister and I,
kneeling on kitchen table chairs
before the opaque windows,
funneled our youthful breath,
bellows-like, toward a favored spot,
slowly melting the stubborn ice,
pearly rivulets pooling
on the enameled sill below
until at last our tiny window
within a window formed.

There we knelt, two wee supplicants
peering through peepholes
at the long, smooth sweep of the deep drifts,
peering at a world so solidly,
so absolutely, white and cold
we wondered when, and if,
buds and brooks, grass and flowers
would ever return.

February

Poor shrunken February,
once day-plump
with thirty turns of the sun,
crafty Caesar robbed you
of a day to fatten July,
his namesake month,
and adding Augustan insult
to Julian injury,
Augustus followed
Caesar's suit,
stealing yet another
of your days
for his pet August.

Alas,
the
shortest
month
you
became.

But not even emperors
could sack your
treasure trove of love.
Good St. Valentine
saw to that.

March

March cannot
be trusted.

Full of bluster
and braggadocio
he swells his barrel chest
like a bombastic *miles gloriosus*,
puffing forth his windy tales,
posturing to impress,
but, like a bad lover,
his poor performance
belies his bold promise.

Yes, full of sound and fury
March may be,
but signifying nothing.

Harbinger

The weeping willow
furls down
its golden cloak
from crown
to foot,

announcing
to all
in
the winter-weary
realm

that jocund
spring
dances
with daffodils
just beyond
the greening
horizon.

Surprised by Spring

Spring caught me by surprise
again this year,
although I was watching for it
all the time,
even though I knew it was coming,
had been counting the days,
the robins and the daffodils,
even though I saw the days
grow longer and lighter and brighter,
the temperatures rise,
and the sap, too,
even though I saw
the rush of bud and brook,
heard the fiddleheads tuning up
for the summer,

yes, spring took me by surprise
again this year,
the sheer wonder and swell
and whelm of it,
the pure extravagance
of love and leaf,
the sweet echo of a Garden
before the Serpent,
before the loss of spring eternal.

April

With your sun-honeyed
entourage of birds and
butterflies and bees,
you gambol
 through
 the awakening land
greening as you go,
transmuting snowbank
into crystal brook,
ice-creak into frog croak,
opening wide the door
for blithesome spring,
bud-blissful
and violet-sweet.

Most welcoming
and welcome
of all the months,
no wonder
St. George and Shakespeare
took you as their own.

Night Music

Nestled in a placid valley
directly below my boyhood home
dozed a small pond
cattail-fringed and springtime shining
with cowslips bright. Lordly mallards,
burnished heads crowned green-gold iridescent,
bobbed for food like graceful metronomes,
and muskrats, cloistered creatures
of dawn and dusk,
shyly swam their algoid byways,
while red-winged blackbirds trilled
their warbled notes of liquid vibrato,
silvered songs of love-struck rapture
that hung suspended in the warming air
like delicate crystal chandeliers.
And then there were the frogs.
Commencing in early April,
the frogs, exuberant after liberation
from mud-molded winter cocoons,
began their nightly refrain,
a wonder of sweet orchestral discord,
from the *pianissimo* of the tiny peepers
to the *basso profundo* of the massy bull frogs.

I can hear their symphony still,
rhapsodic yet tender, joyful yet yearning,
a treasured grace note to meadow-green
memories of youth's plangent pleasures.

May

Flora, goddess of flowers,
it is not surprising you chose

May as your favorite, the month
when all of nature comes alive

with the fragrant poetry of woodland
blossom: violet and valerian,

hyacinth and heal-all,
dogwood and dandelion,

bluebell and beardtongue,
prairie smoke and pennycress,

lily-of-the-valley and Labrador tea,
wintergreen and wild oats.

Your floral figures form a sweet apostrophe
to verdant, vibrant, validating spring.

June

While
May
pulls together
the strands
of
love,

June
ties
the knot.

July

A rambunctious
Roman candle,
jocund July
roars
soars
into our lives,

exploding
into a sunburst
of picnics
parades
baseball games
family reunions
vacations
and beach parties.

Free spirited
and independent,
July is the life
of the party —
and proud of it.

August

King August reclines
full-bellied and languid
in fields fat with fulsome grain,
his broad, sweat-beaded brow
garlanded with goldenrod and aster,
his scepter a milkweed stalk,
its pods plump with silken fluff
soon to parachute throughout
his cicada-whirring, bee-buzzing realm.

Though 'tis summer's peak
the wily birds begin to flock
and podgy squirrels run helter-skelter
burying their nutty treasures
 here,
 there,
 everywhere,
while woolly bear caterpillars,
like ancient seers, foretell
by dint of shaggy pelt
the coming winter's tale.

Summer Reprieve

The rainy days of my farm-boy youth
freed me from chores that jailed my spirit:
no hay to haul, fences to fix, rocks to pick.
When those liberating drops
began to fall
I made my escape to our unfinished attic,
mantled in the earthy perfume
of string-dried mushrooms
and wreaths of smoked venison sausage
suspended on sagging strings tied
around roughhewn maple rafters.

Lying on a shabby, musty mattress,
the rain pattering
a soothing adagio
on our old wood-shingled roof,
I thrilled to Poe's foreboding Raven,
Burroughs' vine-swinging Ape Man,
and Conan Doyle's ingenious sleuth,
my young, adventuring mind
roaming free and wide and joyful
over wild, uncharted realms,
reveling in the rain's
sweet, emancipating reprieve.

Summer's Valedictory

Fragrant dusk in deep August,
the honey-gold sun sinking slowly
through the soft cerulean sky,
its rim tenderly caressing
a hazy amethyst horizon,
the air as gentle as lover's touch,
sweet as baby's breath,

when, from somewhere
in the leafy sycamore boughs
high
above,
the cicadas blossom into song,
their passionate strains
forming romantic background music
for the yearning melody
of a lone wood thrush
eulogizing summer's end.

September

Sumptuous September
cloaked in silver mist
and golden haze
you step upon
the equinoctial stage
with simple grace

—no need
for limelight's glare
and fanfare brash—

autumn's bountiful harvest
proof enough
of your starring role
in Nature's seasonal pageant.

Autumnal Meditation

The gold and scarlet leaves drift
 slowly,
 softly,
 serenely
to the earth,
 without hesitation,
 without complaint,
 without remorse,
no attempt at resisting
the natural process,
no attempt at subverting
the grand scheme of things,

closing the eternal circle
with grace and elegance,

the ethereal beauty
of their final days
both legacy and lesson.

October

Hail, October!
From your bold palette
come the fiery hues
that continue
warming the spirit
when winter's icy winds
blow through our hearts.

Your scarlet and purple,
yellow and jade,
amber and umber,
russet and ocher,
auburn and gold,

turn trees into paintings,
form memories that hold.

Late Hatch

Shuffling through crimson
on a river trail in late October
I nearly step upon
a freshly-hatched snapping turtle,
its obsidian parquetry lustrous
in the slant sunlight,
egg casing curlicues festooning
its petite back like ribbons in a child's hair,
hurrying steps taking it landward,
away from river's reprieve.
Gently picking the infant up
between thumb and index finger,
its tiny legs working frantically
to grip the yielding air,
I change its direction
and place it near the water's edge,
watching until the lonely orphan
slides down the muddy bank,
sinking slowly from sight
in the embrace of a gentle eddy.
By some quirk of fate hatched
a good two months late, I knew
how slim the odds of its fashioning in time
a mud cocoon snug enough
to protect its baby flesh from winter's freeze,
the already chill afternoon air
promising deep frost by morning.

November

November's cruel winds
charge forth
like brawny Viking raiders,
howling, howling, howling
their cold-hearted contempt
for warmth and shelter,
smashing all who dare sail
or stand against them.

Fierce and clamorous,
these bullying *berserkers*
bellow their fury
into every harbor,
into every safe haven,
striking swiftly,
neither giving quarter
nor showing remorse.

Goose Hunting Season

The once neat wedges
are now ragged
as scudding
November clouds,
more odds
than evens
more singles
than pairs
push through
the chill, lowering gray
long necks craning,
sad, obsidian eyes
scanning
the corn stubble
for the missing.

Even the music
is less jovial,
the solitary
black-banded buglers
sounding their
muted, soulful taps,
the forlorn notes
falling like teardrops
on the fallow fields
far below.

December

Though snow and cold
may rule the day,
my spirit soars
in what exists
so rich in hope
beneath the drifts.
Neath blankets warm
the seeds sleep sound,

so thus take heart
all weary souls,
Christ's light grows strong
and Dark sets sail,
the ice will melt,
the flowers prevail.

Christmas Eve Musings

Deep midnight, family asleep
while I stand alone before the window
contemplating the still and frigid
moonlit night, remembering
the cardinals and chickadees
that brought music and color
into my day as they partied
in the bright sunshine
feasting joyfully on suet and seeds.
Where are they now, I wonder?
Dreaming, perhaps, of another cold
and star-filled night
some two thousand years ago?

If they would come knocking
at my door tonight,
asking to share my home's warmth,
I would stretch forth my welcoming arms
in hospitable roost
like a latter-day St. Francis
until, in the dazzling morning sun
of the child Christ,
we would all fly forth
in Christmas joy, making angel wings
in the pristine newly-fallen snow.

Angel Watch

On that unique
and blessed night,
but one star fixed
and shining bright,

the earth stood still
its breath did hold
while closer drew
three magi bold.

The cherubim
stood still as stone
before the child
born to atone.

Passages



“To everything there is a season,
and a time to every purpose
under the heaven.”

— *Ecclesiastes 3:1* —

When Meadowlarks Sang

in every field,
the sun shone bright
in my farm-boy's heart,

as through the verdant
springtime world
my dog and I
romped wild and free,

the air as sweet
as wild bee's honey,
the rainbows rich
with pots of gold,

when meadowlarks sang
in every field.

Wild Strawberries

Ten and tanned
and flushed with joy
I danced my way
in sweet June's whirl
through corn green-gold
and clover honeyed
to a wild ravine
with tumbled stones
so large no plow could pass,
and there,
in that wild secluded spot,
where berries glowed
in garnet glory,
I crawled from plant to plant,
my fingers gloved
in earth's perfume,
my lips and tongue
with scarlet sugared.

The feasting done,
from care full free,
I sprawled content
in spicy grass
with face upturned
toward dozy warmth
of loving sun
my life full sweet
as blushing berry.

Spring Plowing

I walked with the birds
when my father plowed
spring's brown-bearded fields,
joining grackles and cowbirds
as they waddled along,
iridescent heads aslant,
golden eyes seeking the sheen
of confounded earthworms
their dusky dwellings opened
suddenly into bright, lush April.
I, too, searched for worms,
padding barefoot down the cool, damp troughs
oily smooth from moldboard's scour,
only steps before me
the quicksilver plowshare slicing silkily
through the loamy clay,
the earth sucking in its breath
as it rolled on its stomach
naked back gleaming ebony.

Once, I saw glowing angel-white
against the dark-skinned earth,
an antique porcelain doll
blithe to see sunlight again,
its tiny smile exultant.
When I reached for the gift
even the grackles, not immune to grace,
stopped their hunting for a moment
to ponder the baby's radiant face.

Bottled Lightning

As dusk began to fall we watched
for the first faint flashes of light,
pint mason jars with holes
poked through their lids
clutched tight and ready.
At last, someone would spy
a blinking speck of light
then another, and yet another,
soon an entire field becoming holiday,
a widespread Christmas tree
abounding with twinkling lights.
Squealing with excitement
we vaulted into the waist-high grass
hoping to be the first to bottle lightning.
Laughing, stumbling, tumbling,
running into each other,
we chased the tiny fairy lamps
until, giggling and gasping,
we fell, breathless,
making angel wings
in the cool, dew-covered grass.

Later, tucked in for sleep,
jam jar night lights
shimmering beside our beds,
we drifted into peaceful dreams
pearly bright with glowworm glimmer.

Wonder Bread

Soft, snowy white, and factory-cut
into two isosceles triangles
of precise parity,
the Wonder Bread sandwiches
of my town-raised classmates
constituted nothing less than
the eighth wonder of the world.
My sandwiches, thick crusted,
whole-wheat coarse, and hand sliced
from rustic loaves leavened
on a worn
Formica farm-kitchen counter,
possessed none of Wonder Bread's
flawless beauty, none
of its cosmopolitan panache.
In my dreams I swept
into the eighth-grade lunchroom
with royal pomp, swinging
a fire-engine red Hopalong Cassidy
lunch box stacked with pristine
Wonder Bread sandwiches,
all Platonic in form,
no heels, no crusts, no crumbs—
perfect in every way.

My mother, listening patiently
to my sad tale of Wonder Bread envy,
smiled gently and predicted that one day
I might appreciate what I now had,
the years proving her right.

Picking Rock

Each spring, after the plowing
and disking and dragging were done,
my sister and I held our breath
as Dad, calloused hands on hips,
surveyed the fields
to see how abundant the crop
of newly-birthered rock.
Our perennial wish for a stone-free field
was never granted,
so on went our worn cotton gloves
and to our odious task we trudged,
pouting and sullen, dragging our feet
through the soft, spongy soil,
hoisting leaden rock after rock,
no trees to shelter us from the sun,
grimy sweat, crushed finger tips,
chapped lips and blistered feet
our companions in tedium.

But when Mom walked out
carrying a dew-beaded Mason jar
filled with clicking ice cubes
and sweet grape Kool-Aid,
her smile as wide as the brim
of her big, floppy straw hat,
our gritty gulag became a desert oasis,
cool breezes and palm trees everywhere.

The Touch

Clinging like a frightened squirrel
to the hayrack's high scaffolding,
I clutched the long, black reins
leading to the straining team
with every bit of strength
my ten-year-old hands could muster,
while my father worked below,
spreading the spicy waterfall
of cured red clover and alfalfa cascading
from the rattling hay loader.

Power crackled like raw electricity
from harness to hand,
the straining, sweating horses
snorting and shaking their heads
with each pull I gave,
sometimes obeying, sometimes not,
unwilling to surrender their sinewy pride
to my tentative tugs.

But when my father took the reins
in his sure, brawny hands,
softly clucked and whistled
his terse commands,
the horses danced their heaving haunches
left and right, right and left,
like graceful ballerinas.

Accident

The heavy blanket of February fog
swaddled our red '51 DeSoto
as we inched ahead
in the inky darkness
that comes just before daybreak,
my father and I leaning forward,
straining to see the center line.

Creeping around a hairpin corner,
the gloom slowly released a grim tableau:
radiator still steaming,
a semi-truck lay wedged
against a steep embankment,
its crazy roll ending there in oily slush.
Within the cab, pressed wafer thin,
the driver sat bolt upright, a look
of puzzled astonishment
frozen on his blanched face,
bulging eyes wide and staring
far, far down some endless highway.

Barely nine and new
to death's mute finality,
I tried to plumb the depths
of what lay before me:
poor, lonely man, I mused,
so cold and far from home
and not even a blanket
to keep him warm.

Luna

Ethereal as a chartreuse angel,
the luna flailed its gossamer wings
against our kitchen window,
dusting it with flecks of pale gold,
while I crouched beneath the flutter
and, quick as death, plucked beauty
from the violet air,
her new home a quart Mason jar,
a camphor-soaked cotton ball
the pillow on which to rest her head.

When at last wing shudder
ceased,
I pinned my prize
upon midnight velvet,
stepping back to admire
all that I had wrought,
callow twelve-year-old
proud of his handiwork,
but even then I knew,
deep down,
those wings, delicate as moonbeam,
were meant to beat, not to lie so still.

Epiphany

Twenty-one and cocky,
I blithely bid my parents farewell,
slide with ultra-cool behind the wheel
of my simonized '53 Chevy,
my thoughts already fixed
far beyond my provincial horizon
on the glamour of a palm-treed campus
full of exotic promise.
An hour later, car's engine smoking,
I slump against the battered, sticky desk
of a small gas station,
a dour mechanic thoughtfully
rubbing greasy hands
on his loose, grimy coveralls,
reporting with a hollow grin
the repair will cost more
than my car's worth. That night,
alone in a dingy hotel room,
I slowly pick up the phone,
dial my parents' number
and tearfully describe my plight.
Without pause they promise
to send my rescue money,
and *epiphany*, once only
an abstract term learned in class,
becomes concrete as love.

The Middle Years

Like the collapsed flutes
of a spent concertina,
memories of my middle years
squeeze tight together,
no space left for the first steps,
refrigerator drawings,
whispered secrets, bedtime prayers —
no space at all
for those precious moments,
each dissolving into ether
like the dying notes
of a wistful melody.

Now, in retirement,
I watch with careful eye
my grandchildren's quick unfolding,
hoping through sharpened vigilance
to slow time's meteoric passage,
to savor each sweet stage
as it makes its swift transit.

But despite my heed,
despite my stout resolve,
their accelerating lives
gallop by like the horses
on a circus carrousel,
never slowing, never stopping,
my hand upheld in loving wave
as they move quickly by.

Markers

The hands show it first,
their translucent skin
like ancient parchment
inscribed with the hieroglyphics
of wrinkle and fold;
the sure grip of youth
lost to tenuous clasp
and tiny tremors—
prophetic whisperings
of aspen quake to come;
sepia age spots
like tear stains
on faded love letters;
pale blue tributaries
coursing ever more slowly
through sun-bleached plains;
knuckles gnarly and stiff
as branch of venerable oak;
summer's warmth
surrendering
to deep winter's chill.

But wiser, somehow,
those hands,
and gentler,
their tender touch
on a child's head
spring come again.

Reclassification

This time it's different.
I can tell by the nurse's tone,
her slight hesitancy
and nervous humor,
the token listing
of positive test results first,
then the pause,
and finally the "C" word
that changes everything.
The air is sucked out
of my lungs,
my pulse goes berserk,
my mouth tastes
like burnt cork,
the words
reverberate,
hollow and distant,
as if in an echo chamber.
I grip the receiver
numbly,
realizing,
for the first time,
that the world is divided in two
—those who have it,
and those who don't—
and that I have just
been irrevocably reclassified.

Last Class

Walking into the room
in which I will teach
my final class,
end point of a four-decade career,
I am brought up short
by two new faces.

Sitting in the back row,
smiles beaming,
my elder daughter and son-in-law
relish my look
of utter astonishment,
while I luxuriate
in their grace-filled presence.

Forty-four years of teaching
and no better class period
ever.

Retirement Reflections

Relegating meetings, deadlines,
and 8:00 classes to my memory bank

of all-too-full days gone by, watching
with grateful wonder as appointment

book pages return to *tabula rasa*,
discerning no difference between

weekday and weekend, luxuriating
in Sunday nights free from preparation

angst, I settle into my retirement as
easily as into my favorite recliner,

like Prospero, finding my library
dukedom large enough.

Medicare Card

Today I used my Medicare card
for the first time,
chuckling as I blithely told
the receptionist I never thought
I'd see the day,
but really that card was much
heavier than my smile let on,
like pushing a boulder
across the countertop,
a large sedimentary stone
layered with decades of images
from office visits where I had seen
too many arthritic fingers,
stiff and twisted as winter branches,
trying to retrieve the prodigal cards,
too many cataract-filmed eyes
trying to distinguish
one wallet item from another,
too many hands cupped
around straining ears, confused
about what the receptionist had asked,
too many smirks, patronizing questions,
yes, too many of all these things,
and, yet, here I was,
a bona fide senior citizen,
pushing my own leaden card
across the counter,
my molehill of chuckles
hiding a mountain of sighs.

Lurching Toward 70

White-knuckled
I grasp
the hold-bar
of the careening car
no brakes
no way of stopping
this rollicking
breathhtaking
roller-coaster ride
savoring
the wild trip
each twist
and turn
each stomach-wrenching
rise
and fall

plenty of time
for the long quiet
at the end
of the ride.

Life Currents

How effortlessly
the white pelicans
make their down-river flight
this misty April morning,
a pair of wing strokes,
 then a glide,
a pair of wing strokes
 then a glide,
until they're soon out of sight
beyond a bend in the river.

I, too, once glided as effortlessly,
found the currents that took me
quickly, surely, smoothly,
from place to place,
goal to goal, success to success.

While the headwinds of age
now slow my progress,
they in turn grace me
with ample time
to enjoy lilac's perfume and bloom,
sunset's crimson splendor,
a child's artless smile:
time to enjoy every dust mote
of love and kindness.

Too Few, Too Few

In these twilight days
too few, too few

of knowing love
in fullest form,

of meeting grace
at every turn,

I suck the honey,
sip slow the wine,

feast at the table
of heart's delight,

hold dear
the moment,

in these twilight days
too few, too few.

My Garden Heart

When springtime ruled
my garden heart
its paths flowed free
and flowers grew
and flowers bloomed
with little heed and little care.

When summer ruled
my garden heart
its paths ran broad
and flowers grew
and flowers bloomed
in bounty full with heedful care.

When autumn ruled
my garden heart
its paths shone gold
and flowers grew
and flowers bloomed
in colors rich and colors bold.

When winter ruled
my garden heart
its paths turned cold
no flowers grew
no flowers bloomed
my spirit warmed by love and hope.